

*Arts and Communication*

# ENTER THE CLOWNS

Member Guide

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HEAD • HEART • HANDS • HEALTH

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## NOTE TO VOLUNTEER LEADERS

Many youth who are too young to learn lines and be responsible for a role in a play can take part in a freelance drama program in many ways. Clowning is one of the ways.

Many young people do not want to perform bare faced in front of an audience because they are not emotionally ready. This does not mean that they will never be able to give the gift "in person." It just means that we recognize the fact of "where they are." For such young people the clowning program is a good way to be involved in the art of drama while hiding their identities behind clown paint.

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Clown acts can be used between acts or plays at county and district 4-H drama festivals. Clowns can be acrobats. Clowns can be a part of the 4-H horse program. Clowns can be a chorus or band, and clowns can laugh and dance and tumble their way through the corridors and rooms of your local nursing home or county hospital.

You can plan with the young people in your county to have a regular circus performance at the county fair or for your community at any other gathering, indoors or out. This can be arranged either on a club or county basis. If you have the organization, you might even do a very elegant circus at a shopping mall or at a district festival.

## WHAT IS A CLOWN?

A clown is an actor, buffoon, jester, black-face minstrel or pantomimist or mime. The clown has been called by many names through the ages. Here are a few:

- Arlecchino, who became Harlequin
- Fool
- Joey
- Pantalone, who became Pantaloon
- Punchinello, who became Punch

Most cultures have had a tradition of clowning. Ancient Bali and China were among them, as were Ancient Greece and Rome, where clowns followed religious processions and lightened up the day for the children amid the spectators. Almost every royal court had its fool or jester and some of the funniest as well as the most profound lines in Shakespeare are acted by the fool or the jester. Women have been clowns since 1875.

To trace the history of our modern white-faced clown, we need to go back to the Commedia dell'arte of Renaissance Italy. The Commedia was a group of traveling players or mummers who acted out funny comedies in the tradition of their theatre, which was to work without a written script. The stories were familiar and of a fixed style. The characters were almost always the same stock personalities from play to play.

The hero in Commedia productions was called Pierrot. He wore a classic domino or loose top with pompoms and a ruff collar over plain full pants. He was very often dressed in black and white. The heroine was Columbine. She was lovely in a full tutu with a tight-fitting bodice. The girl had a father. He was a funny old clown with baggy short pants. He was called Pantaloon.



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At first, the funniest clown of them all was called Arlecchino. He was a boisterous fellow who always played the role of a servant who convulsed the audience by aping the upper classes and falling on his face both literally and figuratively.

Arlecchino later became more of a social critic and more clever all the time so that the Commedia needed a new buffoon. Thus, Arlecchino became Harlequin in elegant diamond-patterned patches and the theatre developed a new clown, Punchinello. Punchinello remained a rough, short-tempered funny man all of his career and finally moved to England, first as an acting character and finally as a puppet in the Punch and Judy Show. You must remember that the circus clown as we know him today would not appear for many years. Clowns performed in theatres, on street corners, at fairs, and finally, in small traveling companies that moved from town to town throughout Europe. Each country and each traveling show developed its own character and style. Some clowns talked, while others were mimes that had to be watched with great concentration by the audience if they were to understand. Some clowns traveled with animals, but not the great elephants and other jungle beasts we associate with the circus today. They might have a trained dog, pig or tame dancing bear.

The story goes that the first white-face clown was a baker's assistant in France who clowned in his spare time. One day he came to work late and went "on" with his face full of flour. The audience loved him and that – according to legend – was the beginning of the white-face clown.

The funny, stumbling, grotesque clown is called an Auguste. This clown came from Germany. The word clown is of old Scandinavian derivation, meaning a clumsy person. The Auguste clown is not one of your spangled, satin, white-faced dandies. If he wears a suit, the suspenders might start at the knees and the waist band might be 10 sizes too large. The shoes often are enormous and his whole wardrobe is a riot of colors that are deliberately mismatched. Sometimes he is a happy clown, but more often he is a roughneck, seemingly an undisciplined and slightly mad character. Sometimes he is a sad clown, who plays the role of the world's goat and is the butt of jokes and the sad things of life.

In America as well as England, circus clowns who do general clowning in groups or alone are fondly called "Joeys" by circus folks after one of the greatest of all modern clowns, Joseph Grimaldi. The circus clown as we in America know him today is a development of the giant American circus, the three-ring circus, which demanded that everything the clown did be more grotesque than it had been before so that his

gestures could be seen and understood by vast audiences sitting at a distance from the performance rings on the floor of the tent.

### **WHY BE A CLOWN?**

The most obvious answer is a clown makes people laugh. What could be better than that!

Also, clowning is important because it's an art form. What a great way to find out what it's like to be someone else, even if only for a little while.

And clowning is creative. As you build different characters and acts, you exercise your thinking processes.

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## CAN I BE A CLOWN?

Of course, you can. But to be a clown is not just to put on a funny face and do a few somersaults. It's not just being silly, noisy or rough. Your character may be all these things. But to project that character so that he is lovable or funny, you must understand why he acts the way he does and make those reasons clear to the audience.

You must also find your own clown character. No good clown ever steals the face pattern or the character of another clown. Of course, no two faces are alike so that the make-up on one face can never look quite the same on another. Clown acts have been done over and over through time and the basics of this experience are the material used by most clowns. The character of the clown is his own exaggeration of life or some aspect of life as he sees it.

## GETTING STARTED

The great sad clown Emmett Kelly, whose character "Willie" is famous all over the world, spent a lifetime developing his character. Kelly was born on a farm in Missouri and sent away for a cartooning course. He tried to find a job as a cartoonist but ended up as a sign painter. He drifted to the circus and became part of a trapeze act. He tried to be a white-faced clown but that didn't suit his character. Then he remembered a cartoon character he used to draw – a sad-faced tramp – and thus the character "Willie" was born.



People used to come to clowning late in life, some as old as 40. Nowadays many young people want to start out as clowns and they must find a suitable character early and begin the long, often rewarding journey through life as a clown. Today, Ringling Brothers has a college of clowns in Florida and young people with a serious vocation for clowning can apply to this school for training. If you're interested, check it out at Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Clown College, 1401 Ringling Drive South, Venice, FL 34285.

### Assessing Yourself

Where do you begin? You begin with yourself. What kind of person are you? Would you like to be a sad clown or a happy clown? Would you be in character as a boisterous rowdy, or just as a quietly funny little man or woman? Would you like to work up an act with an animal? Would you like to be a clown on horseback? No one can answer these questions but you.

When you have decided what kind of a clown you want to be, then think of how you want to look. Are you going to be a white-face clown and wear a baggy costume in many different and beautiful colors with a full, ruffled collar? Are you going to be an acrobatic or an equestrian clown in spangles and tights with a ruffled waist and white skull cap with a pointed cap on top? Are you going to dress as an old tramp with big feet and a coat that drags on the floor?

Your next job is to mix up a good amount of clown white and get a mirror, some red grease paint (lipstick) and some very heavy black grease paint (soft eyebrow) pencil, and some black eye shadow. Sit down and go to work. Try out different ways of painting your face. Mineral oil and old rags make the best make-up remover. Don't keep the used rags lying around. They are a fire hazard. Or, you can use cold cream and facial tissue. When you have found your special face, then do the make-up over and over until you have it down pat.

If you wish to be an Auguste clown, you will not necessarily use clown white. You may use a mixture of ruddy grease paint with the white to get the less mask-like look obtained with the use of color in your make-up.

Do not put the clown white where you intend to paint with red or black or you will get a messy pink or grey. Many clowns use little make-up sticks to remove white face from the spots they intend to make red, such as the lines around the eyes or the lines on the forehead. Paint white make-up down to the mouth area and mark an outline of the large red



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or black area you wish to color. Make-up is a very personal thing. Some clowns like a lot of white and color, while others just like the effect that a few strong lines can suggest. Again, it's up to you.

### Types of Clown Acts

“Charivari,” meaning uproar, is usually the first act of the circus. It is the entrance of “a thousand clowns” with noise, tumbling and general clowning, props and music.

“Fill-ins” are another general entrance of the clowns. They come in between acts in all three rings and create commotion and diversion during changes of scenes. Apprentice clowns, stage hands and, in fact, all hands take part in a fill-in.

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“Walk-a-round” is the name given to individual clown acts going on at the same time as the clowns circle the ring. A clown may do his act, walk a little way and do it again for the audience in another part of the big top. These are short skits done by one or more clowns as they circle the arena.

“Entrees” are generally the rough and tumble acts of the Auguste clowns. Machines explode, balloons burst, and color and noise run riot in these familiar but structured clown acts that are among the most important kinds of clowning.

The “carpet clown” is a specialist and a loner. He has many funny acts or bits he takes out into the audience. You have to be pretty sure of your act and also be used to working close up to the audience in a very special way to be a carpet clown. Emmett Kelly worked with small sections of the audience or individuals in a close and personal way.

Other clown acts are the more studied acts of the classic white-faced clown. Remember, clowns may be aerialists, bare-back riders, wire artists or any other actors in the circus family, except that they are funny. These clowns, when they work in a small arena or on a stage, may talk but in the large three-ring circus they must become masters of the art of pantomime or “silent” acting.

In today’s modern circus, there is less distinction between the classic clown in white face and the Auguste clown who is an outrageous and raggedy fellow. Many times in the circus ring today you will see them working together, not only in acts and entrees, but even on the high wire and in the ring.

### Famous Clown Acts

Here are some of the funniest and most famous clown acts that have appeared in the three big rings:

#### *Delivery Boy*

For this act, the clown needs the following props: four flower pots, graduated from small to large and all the same shape; four crepe paper plants made from cut leaves and wired to the bottom of the pots. The small plant should not exceed six inches. The largest should be as big as the clown can handle. The clown then goes through the audience calling for a Mrs. Throckmorton to deliver a small plant. He continues this throughout the performance, carrying a larger plant at each interval. Finally at the end of the show, the poor clown greets the departing audience with the largest plant. He staggers under its weight. He is still paging Mrs. Throckmorton.



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### *Dinner for Two*

A tramp clown with a small dog pulls from his oversized overcoat a candle, a frying pan, a can of dog food, a table cloth, two bowls, a fork and a can opener. He opens the can, pours the contents into the frying pan and heats it over the candle. He sets the table, including a decoration from his hat or buttonhole for a centerpiece. He neatly serves himself and canine friend, and then they sit and solemnly eat their supper. (Candle also used as table decoration.)

### *Fire Department*

One clown in fireman's hat runs into the ring screaming that his house is on fire. As he calls for help, the whole company of clowns comes running out, each one carrying a glass of water.

### *Greetings*

Four clowns run on. A fifth clown stops half way with a stone in his shoe. He sits down. The first four clowns sing in order. The first clown sings "H"; the second clown sings "E"; the third clown sings "L"; and the fourth clown sings "L." They all look for the fifth clown who, with a mad dash, runs to place late and sings "O."

### *Shopping Trip*

Large woman clown walks first. She has been shopping and her husband, a very short clown, carries many packages. Each time he stoops to pick up a dropped package, another one drops. He gets furious and pelts his wife with the packages. She turns on him and chases him, flaying him with her umbrella.

### *Summer in the Park*

A very large clown dressed as a lady with an enormous bustle and a tiny hat and umbrella goes for a walk. As she strolls around the ring, her bustle gets loose and sticks to the floor. She walks on, displaying red and white striped underwear from the rear. Under the bustle is a small clown who runs to catch up as they wander around the ring.

### *Thousand Clowns*

A clown drives a very small Volkswagen-type car to a place in the ring where under the sawdust is a concealed trap door.

He parks the car, opens both doors and the trunk and then out jump, tumble or fall a "thousand clowns." You might make a cardboard silhouette of a small car and position it in front of a slit in the curtain. Make sure the curtain is pinned together below the top of the car. Then from back stage you can bring out your own "thousand clowns."

## **PROPS**

### **Slapsticks**

Get two pieces of thin lath wood. These pieces should be about 20 inches long. Use masking tape to fasten the sticks together at one end, close to the edge. Practice hitting with the slap stick. Remember, only hit lightly on the back side! When the sticks slap together, they will make a loud noise.

### **Growing Plants**

Buy three cheap plastic flower pots in graduated sizes. Make the plants out of green crepe paper. The fourth pot, a plastic waste basket of the same color, will hold the largest plant and should be built on a wire frame. A corn plant is familiar to all of us and would be easy to make in four sizes. Fill the flower pots and waste baskets with plaster of Paris and spray the plants with shellac.

### **Firecrackers**

Firecrackers can be made from large juice cans covered with red construction paper and a pipe cleaner wick. Fill with plaster of Paris.

### **Costumes**

Clown costumes can be made from many materials. Of course, the simplest is to use old sheets dyed and painted with dots, flowers or circles. Simplicity and Butterick sell clown costume patterns that you can make.

Clowns can wear leotards and tights with ruff collars, tramp costumes, funny dresses and anything that creates a character for you. Resale shops run by Salvation Army, Goodwill, St. Vincent de Paul and others have a variety of old hats, purses, ties and other accessories you might use. Clown hats can be made or bought from a costume shop or



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fun shop. You can make a clown peaked hat from construction paper, cardboard or even sheets of newspaper. They may be covered with material or painted to go with your material. Be sure you have a rubber band or ties to help to keep the hat secure.

If you are going to be a white-face clown, you will need to make a stocking cap head cover with the top of women's white stockings. Pull the stocking over your hairline, front and back. Pull it well down over the ears. Have someone mark the place where your ears would go in the stocking hat. Then cut off and sew the edges with a sewing machine, including the ear openings. Get used to wearing the skull cap. Try out your make-up with the cap in place so that you will not need to apply make-up all the way to the hairline. Over the skull cap a clown may wear a fright wig, a Halloween wig, a wig made of a red mop fastened or pinned to the skull cap, or even the classic clown conical pointed hat.

### **Make-up**

Much regular make-up manufactured today for eyelid color, lip and cheek color is grease paint called by fancy names. Look around for a good grease pencil and some bright lipstick for a start. If you are seriously investing in clown make-up for yourself or a club project, check out your local yellow pages or the Internet. A unique site is [http://](http://www.mallatts.com/)

[www.mallatts.com/](http://www.mallatts.com/), home of Mallatts Pharmacy, 3506 Monroe St., Madison, WI 53711. Mallatts has provided theatrical make-up for over 60 years to theatre and school groups throughout Wisconsin.

If you want to make your own, try this homemade recipe for clown white face make-up:

8 oz. - Powdered zinc oxide (from drug store)

6 oz. - White talc

1 jar - Cold cream (whipped style like Ponds)

Mix well and try it. If you want it lighter, add more cold cream.

### **Props to Make or Find**

- Balloons
- Balls
- Brooms
- Exaggerated, funny, oversized or fake spoons, toys, shoes, etc.
- Fake ice cream cones
- Mops
- Pails
- Toy or real animals
- Toy or real musical instruments





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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Books on Clowning

- *Badger State Showmen: A History of Wisconsin's Circus Heritage*, by Fred Dahlinger and Stuart Thayer, Circus World Museum & Grote Publishing, Madison, WI, 1998.
- *Be A Clown! The Complete Guide to Instant Clowning*, by Turk Pipkin, Walt Chrynwski and Chris Reed, Workman Publishing, 1989. Handbook covering all aspects of clowning, including make-up, funny faces, costumes and props.
- *Be a Clown: Techniques from a Real Clown (Quick Starts for Kids)*, by Ron Burgess and Heather Barberie (Illustrator), Williamson Publishing Co., VT, 2001. Children's book (Grades 4-8) introducing the basics of clowning, clown types, character development and various funny bits.
- *Clowns*, by Douglas Newton, Watts Press, NY, 1957.
- *Creative Clowning*, by Bruce Fife, Tony Blanco, Steve Kissell and Ed Harris, Piccadilly Books, 1992. Includes sections on the history of clowning, creating a unique clown character, the mind of the clown, make-up, costuming and talents (juggling, balloon twisting, magic, balancing, stilts, etc.).

### Web Sites on Clowning and Related Topics

- Barnum's American Museum, Bridgeport, CT: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA02/freed/Barnum/museumentrance.html>.
- Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI: <http://www.circusworldmuseum.com/>.
- Clown History: [http://www.charliethejugglingclown.com/clown\\_history.htm](http://www.charliethejugglingclown.com/clown_history.htm).
- Clowning 101: A Clown for All Occasions: <http://www.gumdropthec clown.com/page3.html>. Looks at clown history and provides jokes and activities for young people.
- International Circus Hall of Fame, Peru, IN: <http://www.circushalloffame.com/>.
- International Clown Hall Of Fame: <http://www.theclownmuseum.org/index.html>. The first and only museum devoted solely to the art of clowning in the world; founded in Delavan, WI, in 1987. It has since moved to temporary quarters in the Grand Avenue Mall, 161 W. Wisconsin Ave, Suite L1700, Milwaukee, WI 53203, in hopes of moving to a permanent location in downtown Milwaukee.
- Juggling Information Service: <http://www.juggling.org/>. Connects many juggling-related resources. Informative site if you want to juggle or just want information on juggling.
- Ringling Museum of the Circus, Sarasota, FL: [http://www.ringling.org/pages/museum\\_of\\_circus\\_frame.html](http://www.ringling.org/pages/museum_of_circus_frame.html).



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