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drama games
FOR CLOWNING
AND PHYSICAL COMEDY

Foreword by John Wright

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INTRODUCTION

There is nothing predictable about clowns. They don't act a certain way, they can't be confined to a single character, they aren't limited to a certain look. They thwart any attempt at explaining who they are, they won't be relegated to mere words.

So how do you teach something that resists being defined? How can you introduce it to students, ask them to consider it thoughtfully, while it dances around them, seemingly always out of reach?

Perhaps the best way to learn about clowning, then, is to join the dance: get up and move, relate, play.

I define play as a way of exploring and learning through active engagement with the world. Play as a way of creating connections and fostering relationships in order to deepen your understanding and expand your imaginations.

The main objective of all the games and exercises in this book is to develop the playful mind (and body) of each Player. It is this playful mind that begets the clown, for *a clown is a person always at play*, engaging physically, emotionally and mentally with everything around them. They play not only with physical, visible worlds, but hidden and imaginary worlds as well.

Clowning gets dressed up in different ways, has certain traditions and styles, but, at its core, it is a way of interacting with the world through play. This play is inspired by curiosity, which is piqued by a desire to reach out to the world and immerse yourself in it; the best clowning isn't narrowly focused on just getting laughs. This is one of the reasons why clowning is useful for anyone trying to encourage participation and creativity, individual invention, and ensemble exploration.

I've used these exercises with actors, improvisers, stand-up comedians, circus acts, musical-theatre actors, Renaissance players, cabaret artists, mask performers, Shakespearean actors, Commedia troupes, opera singers, at-risk youths and business executives. Some participants had known each other for months, others only met that morning. I've used them with tight ensembles that have collaborated for years, and with groups struggling to find a way to connect. They've been part of one-day workshops, seven-week intensives and four-year graduate programmes exploring physical-theatre styles. They're useful for groups wishing to use the insights of clowning to develop original work and to bring a new approach to existing plays. Many exercises will serve the entire ensemble, others are focused on solo, duo and trio work; these can be used to develop standalone routines and scenes, or to enhance duo and trio relationships within a larger, scripted play.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Terminology

I refer to students as *the Players*, and the leader of the session as *the Guide*. There are *exercises* – which are focused on specific techniques or concepts – and *games* – which also teach specifics but in a more free-form way. I vary the use of he, she and they to describe the Players. In this Introduction, some things are directed to you, the reader (whether acting as the Guide or the Player).

Preparation at the start of some exercises will suggest ways to prepare the space or the Players for what the exercise will require. It will also address any safety issues. The word *Listening* in the *Skills* section at the end of the exercises refers not only to listening with the ears but with the entire body. This encourages not only an awareness of one's own body, but that of others around you.

I have structured this book so it starts small and goes big (in clown terms, minimum-to-MAXIMUM). It begins with two Players standing face to face and sensing each other's energy, learning to communicate on this most basic level. From there things expand: the Players begin to move with each other, they make contact, the playing gets more vigorous; ideas, emotions, movements and objects are tossed their way and they play with it all – while maintaining the awareness of the simple energy exchange experienced in the first exercises.

As the playing expands, it can get a little crazy, at times bewildering. But curiosity, engaging and relating are always emphasised. The Players will begin to delight in the hustle-bustle, wonder at the feeling of being overwhelmed by it all, and enjoy the

opportunity to share this moving puzzle with others. Slowly they begin to see that the apparent madness in all this movement and play can be a method, a pathway to learning. The exercises in this book lead the Players towards comprehending this through *active participation*. They'll experience a greater connection to the group, a deeper understanding of how a clown responds to and shapes their world, and the expression of that world in performance.

Notes are clarifications or suggestions directed at the Guide to help them prepare the Players for a game or exercise. They can also be used to coach the Players as they explore.

The comments under *Side-coaching* give more information about the objectives of an exercise and suggest ways for the Players to get more out of it. They can be used by the Guide to enhance the teaching process, or by the Players who are exploring an exercise on their own (without it being led by the Guide).

The one facilitating the workshop acts as an outside eye, an adviser, the Guide. It is their job to explain the rules, and in the early stages of an exercise, remind the Players to stick to them. They're also the *Boss*, playing the role of the authority figure in the group. This is not stated outright. Will the Players realise that this is the game the Guide is also playing? When does it begin? Will the Players start not only to bend and break the rules, but playfully challenge the Boss's authority? When they catch on, they should toy with the tension between rebellious play and the structure demanded by the rules and the authority of the Boss. This tension is important in clowning. When this is understood and acted out, both the Players and the Guide realise and develop the game within the game.

Game Sources

These games come from a number of sources and have been developed, added to and refined by me over the course of many years, with students from all over the world, and many different performance

styles. Some are drawn from books on children's games, others from actors or improvisers. I have modified them or created variations to serve some aspect of clowning and physical comedy. Some I invented to help teach things specific to clown or devising new material. I hope they will inspire you and you'll develop your own variations, invent new rules, then bend and break them to continue to expand the possibilities of your work and your play!

Preparation

All of the exercises involve some form of physical play, so make time at the beginning of each session to prepare the participants physically. Some of the exercises in this book can be used as warm-ups (especially those in the first half), but you may want to include basic cardio, stretching and vocal warm-ups as well.

The Players should wear clothing that is easy for them to move in but not too loose. Belts, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, etc. should be removed. The Players work barefoot or in their socks, but should have a pair of shoes handy, ones they can wear in the studio to protect their feet during some exercises. Costume elements can be added as the Players start developing ideas about a 'clown look', and when working on solo, duo and trio acts and scenes.

If you can get hold of gym mats – thick ones that Velcro together, not yoga mats – they will create a good surface for warm-ups and are useful for some games. Any props needed are listed at the bottom of each exercise.

Before beginning every session, check the space for any potential hazards: changes in floor levels, sharp corners, loose bits on the floor that might be tripped over, things on the walls that might fall off. Encourage the Players to do the same *every time* they enter the room (things may have changed since the last session). This process also gets them familiar with the space and may offer ideas on how to use the space during an exercise or in performance.

If you choose to jump ahead to the later sections in the book – **Clown Duos**, **Trios** and **Ensembles** (pages 151–97) – it's advisable to play a few games at the start of each session first to get the Players moving and engaging with each other (the **Skills** section at the back of the book – page 200 – describes which games are good for warm-ups and introductions).

Some exercises will dig deeper, demand more from the Players physically, mentally and emotionally. Stay sensitive to the progress of each participant; prepare them for things you think might challenge them, reminding them to keep safety at the forefront of their minds.

Some games will have more than one variation. Many of these were developed with Players who bent the rules, sought to turn the game to their advantage, or were confused by the rules and inadvertently invented new ones. Others grew out of the Players' mastery of a game and my desire to challenge them further. I encourage you to do the same and develop more variations. This is an important process, one that should be pointed out to the Players, as it mirrors the way clown acts and devised scenes are developed. Like a game, the Players start with a few ideas, a few rules. They decide on a basic scenario and begin to play, adhering to what they've decided on at the outset, and in the midst of their explorations, start to deviate, invent, go beyond what was decided and expand the possibilities of the scenario.

I usually don't teach traditional clown routines but instead, through the exercises and games, try to develop in the Players the *mind of a clown*, so they start to see the potential for play and physical comedy in any situation, and how to transform what they discover into performance material. I also want to improve the Players' ability to express themselves physically: all of the games make use of the body, encouraging the Players to find multiple ways to convey thoughts and emotions by how they use their faces, arms, hands, torsos, spines – even their feet!

This is why I use games for training: they get participants used to playing and connecting that to performing, so they carry the energy of play from the classroom to the stage. Their performance for an audience is treated as a game with rules that are meant to be obeyed, but open to alteration by both the Players and the audience. This approach encourages their participation: the Players invite their audience to join in and explore the game *with* them, and give the crowd licence – overtly and subtly – to suggest their own take on the rules (the script).

In terms of devising and developing original material, I find games useful in understanding how to use the authority established by the rules (and the Guide who defines what those rules are), to create a foil, a controller, an adversary. This is someone that the Players want to serve (do what they are told to do), but also want to go beyond to expand the possibilities of their play. Learning how to utilise and toy with this tension between open-ended play and sticking to the script is important for creating and plotting devised material, especially for clowning. Underneath the routine or scene you're playing, there is the structure established by the script (the rules). This is supported – but also challenged by – the dynamic, exuberant energy of the playful mind of the clown, and their desire to bend and break the rules to broaden the potential of a moment or scene in order to create connections between the scripted performance and the audience. As the performance unfolds and the story is revealed, the relationship between the audience, the Players and their performance is deepened and celebrated. The script – and the story it is telling – expands and manifests the greatest gift a live performance can give: a genuine, open, human connection between the Players and their audience.

Buf Da

One of the best games I know for exploring group rhythm, timing, learning to stay calm in the midst of group activity, and being able to take the lead in a game or scene.

One Leader, One Ball: The Players stand in a circle, arm's length apart. *Leader* stands in the middle holding a ball. Leader and the Players toss the ball back and forth saying 'Buf' on the throw and 'Da' on the catch (the ball always goes from Leader to a Player in the circle and back again – never from Player to Player). All the Players (including Leader) time the words so they say 'Buf' at *exactly* the same moment as they throw, and 'Da' at *exactly* the same moment as they catch. This timing is crucial in later variations. Everyone works to create a rhythmic connection between sound, throw and catch.

Any Player can take over from Leader by stepping into the circle and placing a hand on Leader's shoulder (make it a prolonged contact, not a tap). This is the signal they want to lead. The old Leader joins the circle, the new Leader takes over without stopping the game: the Players in the circle time their throws so that the new Leader can take over seamlessly.

Once the Players get the hang of it, let Leader get three to five throws, then a new Leader takes over. This keeps the exchange between Leader and the Players active and lively. Make sure everyone takes a turn at being Leader.

One Leader, Two Balls: Played as above but the Players toss two balls. Start with one ball in the hands of Leader, one in the hands of a Player in the circle. Throws are timed so that as one ball goes out to a Player, another comes back to Leader: neither Leader nor Player should ever end up with two balls. Any Player can become the new Leader as above. Say 'Buf' and 'Da' loud and clear, so that Leader knows where the balls are coming from, and all the Players know where they're going to.

Buf Da Chaos: One Leader in the centre, two balls. The Players don't maintain a circle but move around Leader in a random way, weaving around each other, some running, some standing still. Balls always go from Leader to the Players, never from Player to Player. This is when all elements are crucial: the words 'Buf' and 'Da' spoken loudly, timed *exactly* on the throw and catch, said with the intention of getting Leader's attention. The Players must stay focused on where the balls are at all times. Any Player can become the new Leader, as above.

Side-coaching

- Leaders can control the rhythm and speed of the game. If they feel bewildered, they can slow it down and prompt the group to play at a more relaxed pace. If they feel playful, they can speed up the exchange, challenge the group with how they throw, roll, bounce or hand off the ball. This is a chance to learn to *own* the role of Leader.

- The Players in the circle must support each Leader's way of playing. Some will be focused and skilled, others overwhelmed and awkward. The Players must adjust the rhythm and pace of their game according to each Leader's ability. At the same time, they should challenge Leader with how they throw, roll, bounce or hand off the ball, always sensitive to Leader's response. It's a *collaborative* game not a competition.

- This game is effective in understanding timing, tempo and rhythm, and how to be a leader and control the play or scene by establishing pace and focus; it also shows the Players how to play with and provoke – and support – a leader, while staying aware of others in a scene.

> **+ Two balls (volleyballs, Nerf or playground balls work best). Don't use anything too light, small or hard**
>
> **Skills**
> *Clarity, Collaboration, Ensemble Play, Following, Leading, Listening, Timing, Warm-Up*

Who Started It?

A game that requires individual concentration and group focus, and the ability to pay attention to many things all going on at once.

The Players sit in a circle. One is chosen to be *Observer* and leaves the room while the others choose a *Leader*. Observer returns to the centre of the circle. Leader starts a game – it can be waving a hand or raising an eyebrow. The Players copy Leader and continue the movement until she changes it.

The objective is for the Players not to reveal to Observer who Leader is, while Leader must change the game without getting caught by Observer, who must guess who's leading. If Observer guesses wrong, he must perform: the Guide makes him imitate a chicken, do three push-ups, sing a short verse from a nursery rhyme in falsetto, etc. When Observer guesses correctly, he joins the circle, a new Observer is chosen and leaves the room, the group chooses a new Leader, and the game starts again.

Side-coaching

- The Players work together to develop a variety of tactics for hiding Leader. How do they use these tactics to fool and misdirect Observer?

- The Players should try looking at the group rather than Leader to see when the game changes.

- As Observer, what are the tactics for finding Leader?

Skills
Collaboration, Competition, Ensemble Play, Following, Leading, Timing