

“SEND IN THE CLOWNS!”, OR THE IMAGINATION AT WORK: THE NARRATIVES OF THREE PEDIATRIC WARD CLOWNS

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Abstract

The article presents an interpretation of three narratives collected from three young professionals who volunteer as clowns for the young patients of a pediatric ward in a northern Italian hospital. Through their narratives, the clowns illustrate the role that imagination has in offering a different perspective on a given condition and context (in this case, illness and medical rules), and thereby in contributing to the strengthening of patient resources. The narratives, together with the notes from participant observation, trace the processes whereby the narrators came to identify with, and problematize, the characters of the whiteface clown and the Auguste type clown that the author first encountered during her fieldwork among Italian travelling entertainers, and then researched in the productions of artists (writers, musicians, painters, actors, and film directors).

Keywords

imagination, clown therapy, identity/identification processes, narrative language

Introduction

Between 1999 and 2001, one of the research lines I pursued in the area of intercultural education and social justice was focused on the learning experiences of the children of travelling entertainers. The fieldwork experience, with its challenging but warm encounters and the interpretation of a multifaceted cultural reality (Gobbo 2003, 2006, 2007, 2009), subsequently led me to explore the world of the circus and travelling entertainment as it has been investigated and rendered by artists in different fields (2014, 2015 forthcoming). It is not surprising that my interest for that cultural environment and its inspirational role in contemporary societies was once more revived, and problematized, by a winter conversation with a young man who every week dons the clown Auguste's clothes and, at the pediatric ward of the university hospital, works at bringing smiles to the sick children and the adults (parents, friends, and an occasional nurse or doctor) attending to them. A few months later, in a longer conversation, Salvatore – my interlocutor – explained to me how the association *Doctor Clown* he was a part of aimed to relate to those patients as people, in an effort to counteract the multiple negative effects of illness on the young patients' identities, through laughter and engaging strategies that best succeed when the clowns are most finely attuned to the environment, namely the pediatric ward and the rooms for the hospitalized children, and to the wants and needs of the patients. The mission to humanize the experience of hospitalization with “clown therapy” (Sechi, 2009) is already well known in Italy and internationally, and there are many associations¹ that practice it thanks to the volunteers “sent in”² to devote some of their time and creative skills to young and elderly patients (as is the case of *Doctor Clown*). While I could not but appreciate my interlocutor's investment in the association's goals and projects, I was especially interested in the learning and imaginative processes he had experienced to become an effective clown: what did the experience of stepping into a clown's shoes entail? Were circus clowns his source of inspiration? What were the successful tricks of the trade? Furthermore, I wondered how he had joined the association, the competences he had acquired, and what this “professional” identity that he regularly, albeit temporarily, assumed meant to him? In fact, the conversation suggested that the research path on

¹ E.g. *The Big Apple Circus*, *Theodora Children's Trust*, *Ridere per vivere*, *Dottor Sorriso*, *Soccorso Clown*, *Clownterapia*, *Associazione Dottor Clown Padova*.

² See the first paragraph of the article's Conclusions.

imagination and the arts I had begun to explore (Gobbo, 2014) after my fieldwork could be relevant for understanding and interpreting the choice of becoming a pediatric ward clown, while the latter, in turn, could provide a different perspective on the appeal that the circus and circus characters (and, earlier on, the medieval jesters) have for artists and citizens (see for example Fo, 1974, 1975; Starobinski, 1984; Di Genova, 2008; Painlevé, 1955; Schubert, 2006).

The world of travelling entertainment: from ethnographic research to the arts

My ethnographic research among the Veneto travelling entertainers centered on their children's right to education, which is usually limited by the schools' inability to respond to a nomadic way of life. I aimed to understand the meaning and practice of occupational nomadism as well as the learning and teaching taking place within the families and “on the square”, so as to suggest an educational approach suited to the entertainers' strong disposition to learn and their multifaceted identities. Ethnographic findings gathered through participant observation during fairs and in formal and informal conversations with adults and youth challenged a stereotypical interpretation of their life and identity in terms of an essentially nomadic “otherness”, and instead encouraged an interpretation of travelling entertainers as people who have developed a complex cultural framework able to accommodate the features and meanings of mobile as well as of sedentary lifestyles. In contrast, the teachers I met for focus groups on the schooling of entertainers' children seemed to interpret the current intercultural emphasis on “diversity as an educational resource” in terms of a fixed, reified cultural distance between mobile and settled lifestyles, and thus could neither see the dialectical intersections of cultural ways through which entertainers' children construct their identities nor provide the children with inclusive educational experiences, even though they all praised those students' collaborative behavior in classroom.

Once the fieldwork experience was over, I continued to explore the realm of “occupational travelers” from a different angle: reflecting on the positive aspects of cultural discontinuity (Gobbo, 2015, forthcoming), I noticed how the work and life of travelling entertainers (especially circus entertainers – acrobats and clowns) fire the imaginations of artists. As Starobinski (1984) points out, in the second half of the 19th century and in the 20th century, artists such as painters and writers celebrated entertainers – acrobats and clowns, in particular – for introducing a welcome discontinuity into an everyday reality deeply changed by processes of industrialization and

characterized by monotony, bourgeois honorability, and social automatism³, inspiring a critical distance towards a social and political world that was fast approaching the catastrophe of the First World War, and keeping their own artistic calling at a distance. In the circus, “the noble steeds become riding horses” (Starobinski 1984, p. 43) that mock the military parades, while the same arena, by being circular, “offers multiple points of view” (Di Genova, 2008, p. 19) to its audience, as well as presenting the joy of playing with different roles and identifications to Alexander Calder (Painlevé, 1955) and a challenge to George Balanchine when choreographing Stravinsky’s *Circus Polka: For a Young Elephant*, a ballet performed by fifty elephants and fifty ballerinas (Schubert, 2006).

Approaching the “clowns”: theory and methodology

What I learned from novels, movies, and visual arts about travelling entertainers (Gobbo, 2014) increased my awareness that cultural diversity was not only *there*, in the field, to be diligently described by the ethnographer, or more or less unwittingly essentialized by teachers, but also creatively pursued by many *here*, in an invitation to see the world from a different vantage point, and to question ascribed and neatly bounded identities by imaginatively identifying with life’s diversity⁴. It is an invitation shared by philosophers of education (Greene, 1978, 1995; Hanson, 1988; Appiah, 1996; Nussbaum, 1997; Griffiths, Berry, Holt, Naylor & Weeks, 2007) who further strengthened it by contending that in our contemporary multicultural societies the exercise of the imagination can foster a crucial understanding of cultural differences among teachers, intercultural educators, and citizens as well as nourish a critical stance in support of human rights and justice by contributing to shedding the habits of civic passivity and reclaiming the responsibility delegated to those in charge.

Maxine Greene (1987, 1995), for instance, interprets imagination from an emancipatory perspective that would counter a resigned human condition

³ In a text published in 1916, Henry Bergson identifies laughter as the “social gesture” that can restore the individuals’ attention for people and events, make them aware of the routinized behavior of themselves and others, and enable them to challenge social conventions, thanks to the arts (Bergson, 2001).

⁴ It should not be overlooked – lest the stereotype be further reinforced – that a number of travelling entertainers are from sedentary families and come to share a mobile life because they fell in love with a travelling entertainer or heeded the call for a different way of living.

and promote praxis out of a novel socio-political conscience⁵; for Martha Nussbaum (1997), to imagine is to go beyond an everyday experience that up to that point has been guided and supported by the prevailing constellation of socially approved assumptions, judgments, and values, or, as in Kwame A. Appiah (1996), by “scripted” identities. Karen Hanson (1988) stresses that when the imagination is not illusionary wanderings of the mind, it represents a significant way for a person to get in contact with him/herself, as well as learn about others and be touched by such learning. In the end, thanks to the changes in awareness that imagination promotes and sustains, we can distance ourselves from the conventional and the taken-for-granted, and eventually construct a common ground with others. Such a theoretical perspective seemed relevant for understanding how people as diverse as those I met at the training sessions and in the pediatric ward’s *ad hoc* locker room, and then observed in their clown costumes interacting with children and adults, commit themselves to a novel project of active citizenship and sharing (as the narrator Dario defined his own involvement) that cannot help but involve an experience in cultural diversity and imaginative identification.

As on previous occasions (Gobbo 2004, 2010), I chose to explore and interpret these experiences through “narrative language” (Scheffler, 1991), namely by addressing “the activities and feelings of people” and gaining “access to the way those people understand themselves” (Scheffler, 1991, p. 121), by listening to them as they speak in their own voices. I asked Salvatore and two more “senior” clowns – Dario and Claudio⁶ – if they could step into the role of narrators and tell me about their choices and experiences in “the form of a story told in the first person” that is “not only narrated in a chronological sequence but also – and particularly – ... is structured by the narrator’s intention”. This methodological choice is qualified by the recognition that “it is the narrator’s view of things that governs the story’s development, the narrator’s beliefs, desires, obstacles, and lacks that frame its dramatic movement, and the narrator’s vocabulary that shapes the episodes

⁵ Though some of her essays were written in the mid-1970s, when the debate was starting about the limits of growth and pollution, the industrialized world was experiencing economic stagnation and inflation together with the oil crunch, and people tended to recoil from civic participation, those essays and her passionate commitment are still educationally relevant today when we witness how a globalized finance economy seems to be successfully taking political decision-making processes and social responsibility away from citizens and their governments.

⁶ The narrators authorized me to use their names for this article.

recounted and defines the current problem to be faced” (Scheffler, 1991, pp. 121–122)⁷. Salvatore suggested that before collecting the stories I participate in the training meetings held in May for aspiring clowns (also dubbed as “neophytes”). I also asked permission to observe the clowns’ interventions from a distance over three evenings in June. Salvatore’s suggestion proved to be truly useful because it allowed me to realize how many aspiring volunteers intend to support and enliven children’s hospitalization by performing the clown’s funny acts, and also to learn some of the crucial – and for me unexpected – ways of playing a clown⁸. During those May evenings, I sat quietly in a corner of the room used by the association to carry out the training and observed the exercises the neophytes were invited to practice. At the beginning of the evening, participants were always invited to walk around in the center of the medium-sized room; while they moved somewhat aimlessly within the borders of an imagined perimeter – a metaphorical “raft” as it was called, that was sometimes made visible by placing chairs to form a rectangle – they had to try and *feel* the space and the relations it could foster or block. This exercise was meant to make the future volunteers aware that the relationship with the small patients and their relatives would be carried out in a room whose size, together with the beds, chairs, and medical devices, would not easily facilitate the clowns’ efforts to lighten the hospital stay and recovery. The need to come to terms with the spatial constriction of a hospital room was also learned by walking in pairs (*in coppia*) and taking turns leading each other blindfolded: the aim was to convey that without building and maintaining reciprocal trust and confidence between a clown pair it would be difficult, if not impossible, to make the visit successful. In fact, when a clown pair (*coppia di clown*) enters a hospital room, they never know exactly what to expect or how they will be received. If each clown can count on the partner’s ingenuity and support and understanding of the situation, their intervention has a good chance to succeed and bring smiles and even laughter.

⁷ The last points connect the narrative languages (as one of the four languages of education) to Scheffler’s “practical theory” of education, namely a theory that “organizes its propositions so as to provide guidance to some practical enterprise, for example, the healing of the sick”, for which the relevant knowledge “is drawn from no single scientific discipline” (Scheffler, 1991, p. 118), since the practical problems to be addressed are not constrained by the limits of just one disciplinary approach.

⁸ In Italian, they all described what they were doing as *fare il clown*, which I translate as “to play the clown”, thus underlining the representational aspect of the clown identity and preventing the assignment of an essentialistic dimension to it.

In the middle of the training meetings, time and attention were devoted to presenting the historical and cultural characteristics of the two clowns that make the pair and to illustrating the logic underscoring the difference between the whiteface clown, with his perfection underlined by the beautiful clothes he wears and his authoritarian countenance, and the Auguste who, with his lack of skills and elegance, successfully mocks, challenges, and even desecrates the whiteface clown's rules and expectations, provoking the audience's mirth. After this presentation, clown pairs were composed and had to enact the white-Auguste relation through a silent pantomime, taking turns in playing the whiteface and the Auguste. The final part of the training was devoted to a sort of theatrical representation: each neophyte was first sent to the “wings” (actually a ceiling-high bookshelf), emerging to sing a song to the audience, which comprised the trainers, the remaining neophytes, and myself. The trainers did not expect to hear especially good singing (though that happened in a case or two), and would accept humming or made-up lines if the original ones were forgotten, but they demanded that the singers be able *to touch* the audience and convince it of their authenticity. At the same time, and during the whole training, the neophytes were firmly reassured by the trainers that uneasiness, embarrassment, and the lack of a script represented precious resources for the clown pairs, who should cherish them, since they enter a hospital room knowing very little about those who are inside and thus cannot (and should not) impose a predetermined entertaining plan on them (even though every new clown tends to do that as a form of personal reassurance, according to Salvatore).

After participating in the training meetings, I went on to observe the actual interventions that clowns made in the various sections of the pediatric ward. They visit the ward rooms twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays, from 7 pm to about 10/10:30 pm. At 7 pm, the volunteers gather in the *ad hoc* locker room, cluttered with children's toys and drawings, and leave their mundane clothes to don the clown garb, which is usually composed of unusual pants and hats, imaginatively stenciled jackets, sometimes a wig or a bow. After they all have put on a similarly striking make up, the person responsible for the whole group of that evening makes suggestions as to who will pair with whom. When they have reached an agreement, all of the clown pairs shuffle out of the room and toward their assigned sections. They will return to the locker room shortly after 9 pm when the dynamics of the visits will be presented by both clowns of each pair, and every significant event or detail analyzed and collectively debated, while faces are cleaned and clown clothes taken off and put away to be used the following week. This “ritual” seemed especially relevant during the three evenings of my observations, since each pair hosted a neophyte clown, and the visit reports were thus meant to provide especially useful feedback both for the neophyte and the senior clowns. In

fact, in those weeks volunteering also doubled as an occasion of apprenticeship, often engendering thoughtful reflections on the difficult side of the room visits, as happened one evening with the case of a seriously ill child and her worried parents. I followed a different clown pair during each of the three evenings, and was always invited to compare what I had learned from my outside observations⁹ with the clowns' internal point of view and to share my comments on what had impressed me of the clowns' acts and capacity for relation building with the young patients and the adults attending to them.

Collecting the stories: singular identities, collective aims

Eventually the time came to meet the three people whose stories I was going to collect. I met each of them separately, according to their availability, and taped the story. After transcribing it, I sent it to its narrator so that he could read it and clarify passages if necessary.

Claudio inaugurated the narratives: in his early forties, he is a family man with two children, and a thriving business in realty. He narrated his story in the backyard of his home just outside town, where he had built a treehouse for his children and where the neighbor's chickens contributed to our conversation with their noise. During the narration, Claudio often strengthened the point he was making by switching to the local dialect (which I understand and speak fluently) and interlacing a serious reflection with some witty remarks. Likewise, he evoked his own still-vivid childhood memories to compare the metaphorical support clowns provide sick children to the balance and confidence a toddler reaches once his legs can support him standing and moving around (*when I see those children, I see myself as a toddler. To know that in times of trouble one finds support is fantastic*). However, the satisfaction he felt in volunteering as a pediatric ward clown had deeper reasons, since *it means to take a critical stand against the idea that everything one does has to be paid for. (...) To find the opportunity to do something for free and on my own initiative [gives me the chance] to test myself, my capacities, what I can do. A bit like testing my own physical*

⁹ The present research project and its related research questions concerns exclusively those who played the clown, as indicated by the choice to collect their life narratives. Given the limited space of the hospital rooms and my focus on the clowns – rather than on the patients or their interaction with the clowns – I always remained outside in the corridor, watching the clown pair from a distance. Although being out of the room did not prevent me from seeing some of what was going on between the young patients and the clowns, the interactive part of the intervention is not considered here unless it was specifically mentioned by the narrators.

fitness because I want to do so. In explaining to me why he had chosen to volunteer as a clown, he emphasized again the notion of giving support to those who have lost it, evoking the good Samaritan. Then he added that playing a clown in the pediatric ward changes one's own life: *it means to choose a style of life. (...) To play the clown effectively and relate to the little patients meaningfully, one has to place himself on the same level as the one he's helping. Only then he can weave a meaningful relationship [with the patient or the relatives attending him/her]! And to do so, he must bare his soul, strip himself of the redundant, scale down and take the mask off his face that society assigned to him from the time he was born.* The reference to social conditioning had already appeared at the beginning of his narration, and he qualified it in a strong, albeit unexpected, manner: *hospital beds are a sort of social equalizer, because they place every patient at the same level from the floor. It's those 70 centimeters that make irrelevant whether one is a doctor or a poor person, they are all on the same level!* Later in his narration, he argued that *it's the clown "inside" each of us who urges us to do away with rules and privileges and attend to the human dimension.* In my view, Claudio's keenness to "demystify" the cultural foundations of an unequal, or indifferent, social structure is to be interpreted not only with reference to his own view of society, but also through the dialectics between the whiteface clown and the Auguste. In the pediatric ward, Claudio plays the Auguste, and in that role he successfully meets the challenges of an environment characterized by stringent rules and loads of pain, and wins through his wits and careful attention to the needs of the little patients and of their caring attendants.

A story in his narrative effectively exemplifies his acknowledgment of and respect for the environment and his determination to introduce a new perspective there, thanks to his creative ingenuity: after knocking on a door and finding that the child and his mother were not in the mood for clowns, he noticed some pajamas neatly hanging from a hook on the wall. He proceeded to greet the pajamas and then, grabbing the end of a sleeve as if it were a hand, he started to say goodbye by gushing *it was beautiful to meet you, pity time was so short, I wish I could have stayed longer.* Pretending that the pajamas would not let him go, he cried *Please, let me go! Don't do this to me, I really have to go!* and turning to the sick child (now amused and smiling) Claudio asked for help: *Can you tell it to let my hand go? It keeps holding my hand ... please!* Genially supported by the other clown throughout, Claudio ended the performance by putting the pajamas to bed, tucking the sheets in, and singing a lullaby to help the pajamas sleep. *One can do these things, he commented, when he has learned to look into the eyes of a person and let himself be touched by what he sees deep down, beyond the current situation and the medical devices.* Yet, despite his ability to positively turn situations, Claudio accepts the limits that the pediatric ward's rules set to the clowns' action and even stresses their positive significance that is – somewhat unexpectedly – highlighted by the clown's red nose: *legally, we can*

only play the clowns, we cannot give moral support or medical advice. We cannot take the place of a doctor, not even of a nurse. If I wanted to play a different role and take the red nose off, then the clown would be dead. When there are times and situations that make a clown feel inadequate and powerless, the clown should leave the room for a few minutes, according to Claudio. Yet, according to him (and to the indications at the training evenings), some of those feelings are not necessarily negative. Because clowns should instead worry about feeling useful, even indispensable, or believing that there is nothing else they should learn: in clown therapy, as in life, one needs to keep learning, learning to listen, to look around for ideas, even “stealing” the good ones. In short, one needs to remain somewhat a neophyte, regardless of the experience accrued.

Dario, the second narrator, is a Sicilian in his mid-thirties who holds a degree in art history. After graduating from a leading southern Italian university and moving to the Veneto region, he worked for some years as an art expert in well-known Veneto art archives and museums, doing research and publishing. Now, after leaving the area of expertise that gave him professional satisfaction and recognition but little personal gratification, he combines working at a children’s playground in the afternoons, and for the local utility in the mornings, since “one works to live!” and finds that especially the latter job allows him to be “relationally” creative.

His current volunteering as a pediatric ward clown has very distant origins, as he recollected: someone at a children’s summer camp in the early 2000s suggested that he would make a good one. Though he was not sure what his colleague was referring to, he did not forget the suggestion, and later on he learned about clown therapy by browsing the internet. In the meantime he had come to Veneto and started to attend a theater course where one of his teachers was also a trainer for *Doctor Clown*. It is possible that he chose to join the association and become a pediatric ward clown because of his experience with children, but he hastened to add that curiosity also played a significant role.

Because of his experience with theater courses, Dario underlined the characteristics of clown acts by comparing them with those of actors: *the clown can only narrate emotions, rather than showing them [as actors do], narration is his language. He goes from laughter to tears, just like a child, while an actor cannot do this, he must be ‘authentically untrue’, a ‘true con artist’ as Dario Fo pointed out. Let’s say that a clown is not reliable – so to speak – from the point of view of coherence, because no adult person goes from laughter to tears. But a child does, and thus the clown regains the child’s language and narrates the tears and the laughter. No one expects him to be fictionally authentic [like an actor].* As Claudio had done, Dario illustrated the clown’s diversity (and performance specificity) with a story, namely that of a long journey from Argentina to Italy made by train: *obviously it is impossible to cross the ocean by train, but we don’t expect truth or coherence from a clown!*

In Dario's narrative, the theme of civic responsibility qualifies both the meaning that playing the clown has for him and the manner in which it is played: *to know that one is giving a hand and is helping the recovery process [is important], it's a civic contribution for making everyday life better, more livable. For sure, to volunteer means active citizenship. But it also means a personal satisfaction, because one realizes that others benefit from what one [as a clown] does. Maybe it is a form of selfishness, but at least it is a healthy selfishness! In any case, to play this kind of clown one has first of all to question himself, and be ready to make changes in his own life, namely being able to scale down, to "muffle" an arrogant attitude such as "I'll take care of this, I know what to do." Otherwise, it's preferable to do a different kind of volunteer work. Playing this kind of clown made Dario aware of the changes effected to the traditional clown characters – a necessary decision, because the context and the relationship are different, as are the goals. We must try and reach out to the child¹⁰, the parents, the friends, Dario continued, and once this happens the reward is really great. But here there is also a further difference from the circus or the theater, namely that the clown pair does not go on with its antics unless there is positive feedback from the child: we know that one evening we might not be successful with a given child; perhaps he does not want to be involved or we are not able to involve him. We do our best to change the child's response, but if we realize that they prefer to be left alone, we leave. On a theater stage, this would never happen; actors never stop acting because of the audience's indifference!*

In his narrative, Dario stressed a different kind of reward, one which comes from realizing how, in the pediatric ward, the clown pair learns to trust each other, because *it's a matter of a give-and-take between the two clowns, between the clowns and the child, between oneself and the hospital. And, he added, if it works in the hospital, why shouldn't it work in everyday life?* This understanding is enhanced by a double realization, namely that playing the clown taught him to give things their "true name" (*sharing is a word that I discovered with time, it was something I did, of course, but without giving due recognition to its importance*), and that *being clumsy is important ... When we enter a room, we don't know who is there, we don't know their needs, and we can't have a script, because it might not work. How do we know if they want to laugh? Actually, I don't mean that we don't really know what to do: for instance, we can resort to doing magic, or blowing up balloons, or making soap bubbles. They all work beautifully! But the point is: what will work for this child or that child? Thus, the relation we construct with the child and our partner is the most important thing.*

¹⁰ See how this goal was poetically rendered in Pittarello & Praticelli, 2013.

However there are further rewards in playing the clown, namely the possibility of breaking down barriers and crossing borders, something that artists often do: *if I hugged a person on the street, she would think I was crazy, but if I wear a red nose she will laugh! A clown is allowed to do things that adult people no longer do. Breaking the rules establishes a communication channel between us and the patient ... and don't we overturn the meaning of the situation when we engage with the healthy part of a patient? We may "desecrate" a stethoscope by pretending it's a phone, we change the meaning of it ... in art this has been done by Picasso, Duchamp. And you can do this only if you have the naiveté, the candor of a child!*

Not unlike Claudio, however, Dario hastened to say the breaking the rules first implies acknowledging them, and respecting the doctors' indications, so that the alternative always is *to break [the rules] but within the rules established by ... the whiteface clown!* The whiteface clown is indispensable, because if he were as messy as the Auguste, there wouldn't be any need for the latter. But this reflection has engendered a great dream: *we don't plan for Doctor Clown to live forever, it would be wonderful if someone, within the institution, could do what we do. ... We would no longer be needed, and it would be our greatest success.* The last narrator I listened to was Salvatore, a psychologist and my earlier interlocutor, who was one of the founders of the Doctor Clown association about twelve years earlier, and who was now eager to retrace his path, identify his motivations, and locate "the roots", as he said. As had been the case with Dario, Salvatore had learned about the pediatric ward clowns by chance, after being invited in a rather vague way to a training "Come on, come to this course, and then we'll try [to apply what we learned]". To the first-year university student from Sardinia, the invitation had brought back memories of his school years when he was a good but lively (perhaps too lively) student, who had happened to see the movie *Patch Adams* and had been very impressed by it. Salvatore said that if becoming able to play a clown in a pediatric ward gave him the opportunity to "redeem" his teenage behavior, it also allowed him to challenge himself: he used to be afraid of hospitals, and to volunteer in one as a clown gave him a chance to put his fears into perspective and overcome them. Now a young man in his mid-thirties, Salvatore appears to be a quiet and thoughtful person, and no one would ever think he had engaged in unruly behavior when he was much younger.

The way he spoke of his long experience as a pediatric ward clown initially emphasized (possibly to reassure me) how neophytes are supported by techniques that will help them perform. His reflections about clown apprenticeship and performance introduce a critical perspective on the development of the person playing the clown: *at the beginning, the idea of a performance is always there [in the mind of the clown]. The clown dons the clothes, puts on the makeup, steps into the character, and feels the motivation to do things, to make people laugh, as a kind of obligation. And yet, it is not always necessary to make people*

*laugh; we clowns work at various levels, [because] the most important thing is to be close to the people. Besides, there are many cases when unfortunately there wasn't much to laugh at, so that the clown soon learns to lower the tone, muffle the act. However, at the beginning, almost everyone works very hard to put on a perfect performance! That's precisely what I did: I went to as many training courses as I could, exercised daily with magic, learned beautiful new tricks, filled my suitcase with many colored things. It was only later that I realized that all those colored things mostly made me feel better!*¹¹

With time, Salvatore said, he grew more self confident and could thus free himself of most of those “tools”, eventually going to the pediatric ward carrying only a small bag. He wanted to feel free, especially since he had developed an ability in acrobatics that he successfully practiced in the ward rooms: in his clown's clothes and red nose, doing acrobatics, and working with the balloons and the indispensable balloon pump. Salvatore reflected how he went from one extreme (using many tricks and props) to the other, when he left all those “tools” at home, having stripped himself of all he thought redundant, especially since such a step seemed really helpful if the young patients were not immediately ready to be involved. Luckily, he added, after making the change, he was able to work with partners who “compensated” for his simple way of playing the clown. He remembered how his first partner was really fond of magic: he would play the whiteface clown while Salvatore, as the Auguste, supported him with his acrobatics and mimicry. His second partner, Luise¹², shared his fondness for improvisation and for experimenting with different ways to best express themselves, so that most evenings they both entered the ward rooms bringing (and working with) only balloons.

As I noticed how the sick child is at the center of the clowns' attention and acts, Salvatore pointed out to me that the picture – so to speak – was more complex: *we clowns tiptoe into a room after knocking on the door and asking for permission to go in, we always cross the threshold with the utmost attention, because that room is the child's, it has become their home, a part of their life experience, the place where they keep their belongings, especially when a patient is hospitalized for months. You would not go into a home unless invited, thus we only open the door and go in only if*

¹¹ Salvatore returned to this point later in his story, and stressed it again by distinguishing the *beginners' level*, when everything is neatly prepared, magic is repeatedly tested, and the clowns bring lots of things with them to be shared with the children. Or, to put it differently, children are given what clowns have already prepared ahead of time. However, he added, *once this stage is over, establishing a good relationship with each child becomes the most important goal of the room visit.*

¹² Hers is a fictional name.

*asked to come in*¹³. That space belongs to the child and his family ... [Clowns] try to narrate that the room [of the hospitalized child] is a very, very sacred space, and this is simply the truth. And yet, we seldom relate exclusively to the child, or, more precisely, we certainly do, but I think we could also be defined as “environment clowns”, because we must take the whole context (the room, the ward, the adults in there, and the children) into consideration. Actually, I think that the work we do in, and for, that environment is the most important aspect of our way of doing clown therapy. The latter, in this perspective, affects not only the well being of the hospitalized children, but their parents, and even the nurses who can relax a bit when we come in. Like Claudio and Dario, Salvatore emphasized that children are not always in the mood for the clown acts, but that the clown pairs almost always succeed in successfully “playing with”, and “playing down”, the child’s refusal to be involved: *in the end, such a refusal is a sort of acceptance, actually it is really funny to be challenged by it, but it [the denial] is [also] natural, especially when we relate to a teenager who believes clowns are for little children only. It’s a stereotype, but [a welcomed one because] when we try to get in touch with teenagers and they withdraw from the relation, we are forced to be a bit more ‘adult’. On the other hand, acting silly also works, since it allows them [the teenagers] to tell you precisely that – that you’re being silly!*

In one way or another, all three narrators had paid close attention to the needs of hospitalized teenagers. While they often succeeded in making fun of an aspect of the patients’ medical problems (a boy who walks around carrying a drip can be asked whether there is gin in it, or the patient with a leg in a cast can be invited to run a race), the clowns had to pay attention that their mockery was permissible. Salvatore sounded rather seriously concerned when he pointed out that the pediatric ward is mostly meant for young children, yet teenagers must also be hospitalized there because they do not yet qualify for the adult wards. He had a story to tell with regard to this topic, about a girl who had gone through a period of depression that still lingered. She and the other ward patients had been asked to decorate the ward walls with drawings expressing their feelings or hopes. The girl’s drawing was a totally black scene that exhaustively told viewers how she still felt and challenged Salvatore into trying (and succeeding) to explore whether she could add some colored touches to the sorrowful picture. For him the story also exemplified how the relationship hospital clowns build with patients

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My observations during the evening ward visits testify to how well received the clowns were. In one case, relatives visiting a child in the room next to the one where the clowns were came to ask clowns to come as soon as possible. As the clown pair could not abruptly leave the child with whom they were interacting, the adults and children from the next room came to enjoy the entertainment where the clowns were.

minimizes or even eliminates the distance between them, unlike what happens in the circus or on stage. While Dario envisioned the possible end of hospital clowns as a positive development, by placing the relationship, rather than the funny acts, at the center of the clown’s visit, Salvatore foresaw how other characters could carry out the association’s goals, and spoke of the clowns as “means” for establishing rapport. In generously imagining stepping back and being successfully replaced by a different character (even a rabbit would work according to Salvatore), these narrators and clowns seemed to overlook what they all had repeatedly underlined, namely the positive reversal of any condition, relationship, or context that the Auguste clown succeeds in executing and the laughter he incites as a consequence of this reversal. On the contrary, and within the wider perspective of imagination, to make people laugh while speaking the truth¹⁴ (as clowns and jesters did and still do) highlights how “laughter is the true distinctive human trait, that makes [man] different from any other living being. Laughter is the highest form of intelligence” (Fo & Manin, 2013, p. 70), as another narrator – Italian Nobel Laureate Dario Fo – reminds us¹⁵.

Conclusions

“Send in the clowns!”: the refrain line of Stephen Sondheim’s ballad irresistibly leapt into my mind during the first conversation with Salvatore. Admittedly, my imagination made an arbitrary connection¹⁶ that evening, yet the narratives

¹⁴ According to Dario Fo (1974), clowns and jesters are “part of our Italian culture”: through their “unconventional logic” they speak the truth in the face of those in power or authority and thus play a dangerous role that historically put their lives in jeopardy.

¹⁵ Dario Fo subscribes to the discussed etymology suggested by Ben Jonson in *Tale of a Tub* (cfr. *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* 1982, pp. 183-184), namely that the word “clown” derives from the Latin *colonus*, “a Tiller of the Earth”. Quoting a traditional Italian saying, Fo goes on to point out how with his “heavy working shoes and a sharp mind, [he is] a man of action and an instigator ... able to sum up the meaning of a situation just at the right moment, by way of his creative flair, and to show how things are” (Fo & Manin, 2013, p. 33)

¹⁶ Before the conversation (and the research plan to collect the life stories of my interlocutor and of two more clowns), I had never thought about the origin of this famous song, embedded, as I soon found out, in a story that concerns neither children nor clowns. Upon investigating its meaning, I learned that – as Sondheim specified in a 1990 interview – the song title refers to the theater, namely that “ ‘if the show isn’t going well, let’s send in the clowns; in other words, ‘let’s do the jokes’ ... [and] ‘don’t bother, they’re [the clowns] here’ ”. In the musical (*A Little Night Music*) inspired by Ingmar Bergman’s movie *Smiles of a Summer Night*, the character who sings the ballad is a woman who “reflects on the ironies and disappointments of her life” (Send in the Clowns. (n.d.).

I collected document that if Sondheim's metaphorical appeal were recontextualized to the aseptic environment of a pediatric ward, it would indeed be possible to hear it resonate there, urging the colorful and witty characters to do their best to make the young patients feel better. Furthermore, it is notable that clowns, jugglers, and acrobats are also positively used where war or poverty and social exclusion have cruelly affected children and youth, such as in the Gaza Strip (Cruciati, 2014) or in a Roma campsite just outside of Paris (Tarantino, 2014). As the journalists report, in such environments laughter, together with caring and respectful attention, seem able to provide young people with a learning and existential opportunity to reappraise and exercise their agency, not unlike what happened in Romania with the Parada project.¹⁷

In the pediatric ward, as all the narrators stressed, it is the relationships that count, in combination with the gained awareness of the various actors and dimensions that are involved: the clown's bag of tools and competences might grow progressively lighter (though the translucent soap bubbles and imaginatively shaped balloons are always very successful), but their invitation for the little patients to imagine themselves and the environment in a different perspective will persist. On the other hand, each narrator approached the experience of learning to play the clown with somewhat different reasons: Claudio, with his metaphor of the "hospital bed height", sounded the most concerned about social differences and the different attention and treatment they could entail, yet the stress that both Dario and Salvatore placed on sharing with and being finely tuned to the people and the environment subscribes, in my view, to the same concern.

Interestingly, serendipity seemed to have played a major role in the narrators' approach to their new identity and engagement, even though a relevant investment in active citizenship had previously been made by each of them that possibly was determinant in joining the association, so that mentions of civic awareness and generosity intertwined with the narration of funny acts and incidents. On my part, I must recognize that meeting

I found that many people before me had wondered about the song title: among the explanations asked and given, some indicated that the request to "send in the clowns" evokes an old circus practice according to which the clowns were promptly sent into the ring to distract the public and restore everyone's smiles if the show had not gone as well as usual.

¹⁷ See e.g. Genetti, S., & Luzzi, E. (2012); Miloud e la Fondation Parada (n.d.); Miloud Oukili. (n.d.).

Salvatore was one of those serendipitous events that, as has been effectively argued, can often produce an unexpected but fruitful turn in research (Woods, 2003). In relation to my interest for processes of identity construction and diversity among minorities, heeding serendipity’s call that particular evening eventually led me to focus on the re-invention of the clown character and characteristics that clown therapy requires, and on how people with a regular job, a career, or a “social mask” (as Claudio would say) learn to achieve and practice the characteristics we usually connect with the whiteface clown, but especially with the Auguste – in short, to identify with one or the other character in a convincing way. Yet the characters’ changes are once more related to – indeed required by – the goals these clowns pursue, as both the independent and collective critical reflections shared at meetings on the practice of clown therapy had stressed, and as Dario, for instance, explained to me¹⁸. He pointed out that the authentic whiteface clown is seldom played in the pediatric ward, *because since he is perfect and never makes a mistake ... it would imply that the child cannot, or does not, do things well*¹⁹. But, Dario added, *this cannot be our goal since we, on the contrary, strive to make the child the center of attention, and acknowledge that they are the magicians, they do things well in their own way. Thus, if, on an evening, one of us happened to play the whiteface clown, that clown will, at the appropriate moment, yield, bow to the child and declare “you’re the magician!”*

On the Auguste’s shoulders falls – as usual – the “responsibility” for desecration, and the reports at feedback time, after the ward visits, as well as my own observations, testify that such responsibility is carried out lightly but effectively and imaginatively by most clowns – certainly by the “senior” ones. It can be assumed that many of the association’s members, and certainly the three narrators, have wits and a sense of rhythm of their own that flourish in playing the clown. Would this indicate that the latter can be recovered from “deep down” the individual, if there are the appropriate conditions and opportunities? To avoid positing some sort of childlike essence that would grow into the character of the clown – especially of the Auguste – we need to turn again to the imagination and the support the clown gives to people for distancing themselves from and criticizing socially approved conventions, expectations, or “scripted” identities, and for getting them to

¹⁸ In his narrative, however, Dario had also hastened to point out that his and the others’ *desecration* was not unlike the creative and unforeseen gaze that artists cast upon some objects so as to re-invent their meanings.

¹⁹ In such a case, the child would symbolically be the Auguste.

learn about themselves and others²⁰. It is a point I already drew attention to, that the three narrators all stressed how clowns go beyond the “beginner level” once they start stripping themselves of all that is not necessary for establishing a relationship, a step that is educative at the same time that it is therapeutic. In the narratives, putting aside what is redundant, together with the valorization of uncertainty and uneasiness as human and educational resources, contribute to the construction of a professional as well as a personal identity that privileges learning and debating, filing away and inventing (even “stealing”!), rather than accumulating and using pre-prepared plans and pre-tested competences. Despite the respect for rules and norms – which is never disregarded – they indirectly favor irony and an inclination towards waging and accepting challenges. In the end, we realize how these clowns’ narratives and personal experiences convey a message that strongly recalls what Morwenna Griffiths suggests to teachers (and can be extended to other professional identities), namely that “openness to change and adaptation requires” engaged people “to carry out a daunting, exciting, risky re-evaluation of themselves and their pedagogical relationship” (2014: 117) and that is to be collected and disseminated.

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²⁰ It is interesting to note that writers such as German Nobel Laureate Heinrich Böll, Jáchym Topol, and Norman Manea, who lived during the Communist regimes in Czechoslovakia and in Romania, make clowns central characters of their writings to interpret the social and political culture, as well as historical events and changes, of their countries. See Böll, 1965 and Manea, 1995, as well as my interpretation in Gobbo, 2014. In particular, Manea acknowledges how he was inspired by Italian movie director Federico Fellini, who interpreted the character of the whiteface clown with reference to some local characters during Fascist times (Fellini, 1970). With regard to Topol’s novel, see Fischer, T. (2010); Jaggi, M. (2010); Charles, D. (2010); Jackson, R. (n.d.).

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