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The Activist Clown - Breaking with Power and Empowering the People:

How can we redefine clowning as an inclusive and accessible theatre practice for multi-linguistic communities?

Abstract:

Performers tend to opt to make theatre plays using script/dialogue, and when asking themselves how to make theatre more inclusive, they tend to think of options such as adding subtitles or having BSL interpreter. Those are valid points to consider, however, not every performer nor audience member will produce/consume said art form in their native language, which is still a barrier and not fully accessible for them in this case.

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Introduction:

 This dissertation explores how contemporary theatre and performance can become more accessible and inclusive for its participants by focusing on music and non-verbal clowning performances. It is not limited to 'inclusivity', but also a reflection that language is not always enough, or even helpful- rather a limitation. There are certain experiences/stories which escape words; they are ineffable. Either hard to talk about or not yet established in the language, because they are either new, or have been censored, unheard, or invisible. The body language- including voice, gesture, and movement is as powerful as verbal language, in some cases, more liberating, empowering, creative, and more inclusive.

 As an international student myself, from Argentina, studying an Acting degree in an English university in York, I came across with some language challenges at the very beginning of my first year such as struggling with fluency and spontaneity in improvisational verbal exercises during my education. This made me realise the importance and relevance of having different ways of making of theatre a more inclusive experience. "Human movement and its perception [are] inseparable from affect, sensation, and attention" (Sofer, 2022, p. 394). Through my performance projects, I discovered I can still communicate without words, purely with movement, gestures, sounds, and instruments.

 I realised one of the most effective ways to communicate in theatre within performers, as well as towards any multi-lingual audience member is through the language of the music, sounds, gestures, movement- body "[p]henomenology

claims access to a fundamental-transcendental level of cognition, perception, intersubjectivity and being which would apply to all humans." (Sofer, 2022, p.390), this suggesting a mutual connection and reflection that humans have in common with clowning. Although clowning is often associated as a form of children entertainment oriented or circus spectacles for the family, there is a type of clown that goes beyond the silliness of itself – the critical political clown. From Charlie Chaplin's silent films to Clowns Without Borders, diverse clowning techniques that gives power to the clown to send a strongly political message to society.

 This paper research is aimed for performance makers, as well as for audience members. It wants to contribute to the conversation about theatre as an empowering and inclusive practice. I will be using some examples of contemporary clowning across countries and cultures to support my argument about clowning taking its power- enabling power from the non-verbal elements such as sounds. Although purely the body language on its own essence can communicate throughout the entirety of a show, the usage of music enhances the emotions being transmitted to the audience. So much so, adding an extra layer of a different way of communication, without the need of words; this, welcoming cross-cultural communication and deeper emotional human connections. This performance technique is the one I specialise in and will focus on, as the ability to perform to audiences who do not speak your language is liberating and powerful- a human right. Charlie Chaplin, for instance, a well-known artist who lived in a time where the lack of verbality was not a surprise because the filming style was already not-verbal, and the key to his success being how his gestures spoke like language – deep,

versatile, engaging, funny, tragic. His movement vocabulary was so wide yet accessible cross-culturally.

 Clowning as a form is not necessarily seen as a critical and powerful form in mainstream theatre. It usually targets family entertainment, children, as an extension of its past as a form of circus art. However, we do have new forms of clowns today: clowns without borders, hospital clowns, clowns in prisons, clowns in the streets, clowns during protests- clowns telling stories that are not expected to come from them.

 I am a clown, and I have reasons for that; not just because I can move, and I like to entertain. I experienced the enabling, empowering and inclusive aspect of clowning; I found it specifically in relation to live sound and music, and the gesture and movement work, and I want to promote it. I want to talk about this because it is empowering, enabling and inclusive, in a world where the mainstream theatre only language in the scripts, English, may not have space for experiencing minorities.

Gesture and Physicality: Speaking Truth to Power

 Gesture is a form of language, a form every culture has to express different things "Language […] is like a game of charades" (Christiansen and Chater, 2022, p. xi), when playing charades, participants must perform with gestures yet no words; the exact same process happens in non-verbal clowning performances – the clown gestures and takes the audience through a storyline in which they immerse themselves to the point there is only fluidity through the story. The gestures, undermined by repetition at any price until it loses its original meaning, make up an ultimate vocabulary of a language of 'available shapes': steps, figures, and interactions, which are available from the beginning to all kinds of successive modulation. This isolated waste and attempts links in chains of meaning already dissolved and formal reminders of something lost, will flow back perhaps in more couplings and combinations, ulterior contiguities and brand-new allegories (Fratini, 2018, pp. 7-17), giving a meaning to the argument I am claiming regarding to gesture in clowning is not purely for slapstick, entertainment and commercial purposes, rather as a tool to deepen and go beyond the barriers of communication, undoing power. Linking my statement to Fratini's argument, the most meaningless of repetitive movements carry a relevant level of human and social emotion, history and geography of the witnessed events in the world. Producing in clowning a physical

repetition and exaggeration of movement that carries with an affective, effective, and symbolic resonance, leading gesture to express as a poetic tool for political impact.

There is a relationship between us humans, immigrants, have with them, the clowns- immigrants often seen by locals, as a stereotype of people who lack intelligence, yet are trying to 'get your jobs'. However, none of that is a reality. We are not comparing who is smarter than the other, nor trying to get anyone's jobs; we are just human beings like any other, developing our skills and lives; living our life. As a matter of fact, the fools are the smartest and wisest characters, in all of Shakespeare's plays; however, for most people they are consider as ridiculous people doing foolish things "Fool: Nor thou altogether a wise man. As much foolery as I have, so much wit thou lack'st." (Timon of Athens, 1623, Act 2, Scene 2). This parallel reflects the power clowning has, to challenge social parameters and change perceptions, breaking with stereotypes and giving 'voice' to marginalised communities and minorities to reclaim what those in higher positions took from them. The clown is sometimes underestimated and not taken seriously; clowning historically was not necessarily seen as empowering, critical and as a political art form, but rather as an entertaining activity. Going all the way back from Tudor and Elizabethan's times, the Medieval entertainers, such as jesters, minstrel musicians, medieval jousting, acrobats, and dancers, had as a main task, to entertain and amuse the Kings and Queens of England. The fools speaking truth to power, with a classic example from Will Sommers who had once made a joke (circa 1525) about Henry VIII and his reputation of having multiple wives, 'His Majesty after some discourse growing into some good liking of him, said; fellow wilt thou be my fool? Who answered him again, that he had rather be his own father's still, then the king

asking him why? He told him again, that his father had got him a fool for himself, (having but one wife) and nobody could justly claim him from him: now you have had so many wives, and still living in hope to have more, why, of some one of them, cannot you get a fool as he did? And so, you shall be sure to have a fool of your own.' (Sommers, circa 1525, as cited in Teysko, 2019).
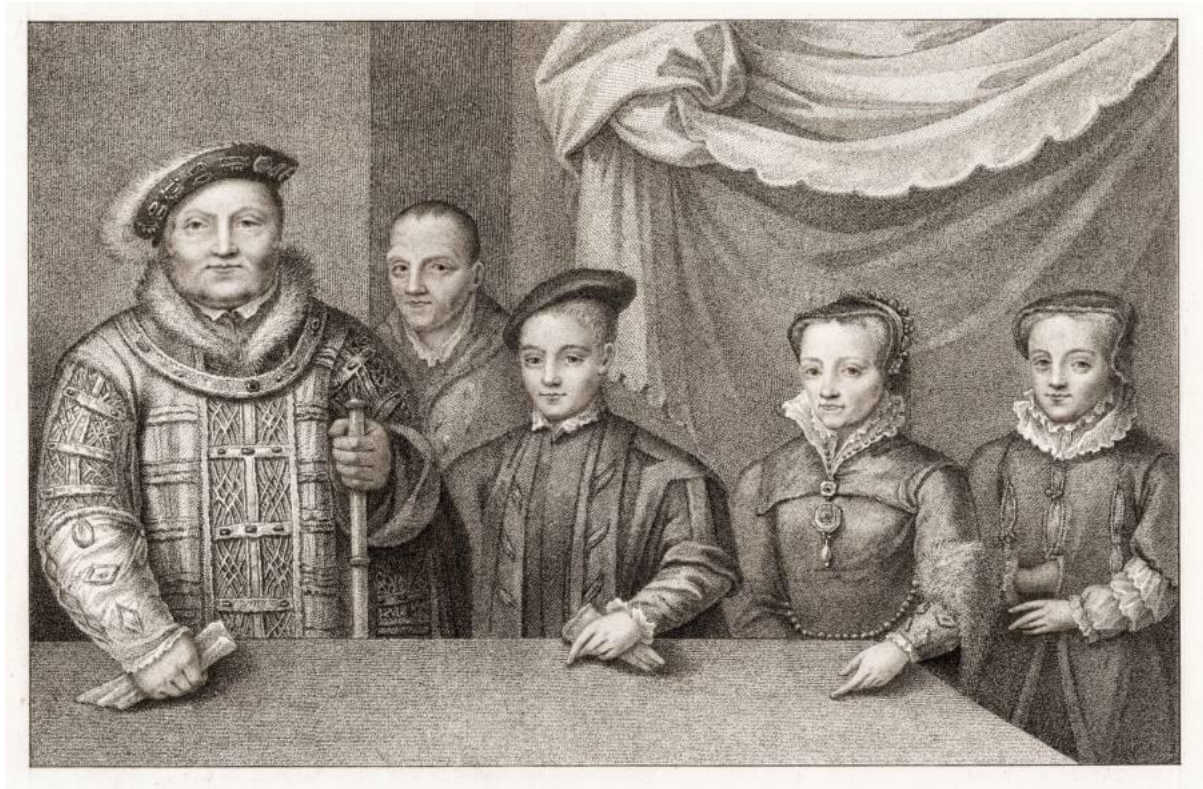
[Image reference: King Henry VIII with his children. Royal fool Will Sommers stands behind them.]

(Harvey, 2023) (Alamy Stock Photo, published 2023).

 Can movement based, non-verbal communication, provide more authenticity, and opportunities for creativity, empowerment, healing, and inclusivity? It narrows it down from inclusivity by finding and redefining the power of clowning today. Kafka describes that there is nothing other than the performative power of gesture and writing the repeated enactment of a gesture will elicit formerly unknown emotional and psychological states of mind, turning comedy into reality (Mladek, 2003, p. 228), this supporting the previously mentioned idea on how clowning gestures enable emotional responses, and new meanings to political messages regardless the language of the consumer and the culture- allowing for a social impact and challenge. Brechtian/Epic theatre is not a non-verbal form but the importance of gesture in terms of articulating a problem, evoking emotion, response in the audience is important; Epic theatre has been used to communicate political messages, gesture itself. Gesture is an essential part of clowning performances used to transmit emotions and tell stories, whilst not using words. The Roman actors, for instance, had developed what appears to be an established vocabulary of sign, with gesture accompanying speech, especially in formal situations, and this gesture, Aristotle introduces (Poetics, 1448b), was largely mimetic. Gestures were used to imitate or represent object, person or action; vase illustrations of probable dramatic action in the theatre are another source of evidence that gesture was widely used in performance (Anderson, 2001, p. 4). Author of "Brecht's Clowns: Man is Man and After", Joel Schechter, explains that although Brecht was not the greatest of comedians, his playwright style was heavily influenced by Karl Valentin and Charlie Chaplin, guiding him into the later inclusion of political clowns into his characters, such as Galy Gay, an Irish porter transforming into a 'human fighting machine' in

Man is Man (Schechter, 2006, p. 1). The character of Galy Gay was a model that came from Brecht's inspirations of Valentin and Chaplin, reflected in a play who references the development of Epic Theatre with a Marxist aesthetic, carrying with the context of the characters being hardworking civilians who end up having everything in their world destroyed, such as their homes burning down on fire; and with Gay's civilian normal life comically transitioning into a soldier's life, with the moral of the play being 'Man does not help man' (Schechter, 2006, p. 4); gesture is also an essential part of non-verbal clowning liaised to gesture- physicality, by miming and doing slapstick, as a way of telling stories through the language of the body instead of the voice. The gesture, the physical form of clown, allows the creation of performances which deals with the limitations of the body itself. "[…] push productively at the limits of what is legally or socially possible at the scale of the body" (McIvor and Walsh, 2024, p. 229) breaking boundaries between the openly spoken topics in society to the taboo ones, as a form of activism through art.

 The fact that this is an overly physical form, that can make it difficult to talk about certain subjects which are taboo in relation to physicality, such as sex and disability, is a paradox that clowns use an overly physical form to have a dialogue about physical taboos, not by showing the audience how to have sex, but by using clowning as a medium to explore it- this is as incredible as it is very political. Social circus is seen as a way of approaching social topics, particularly by empowering people experiencing marginalization to express themselves and form new connections within the society where they feel excluded (LaFortune and Bouchard, 2010, pp. 13-14). In addition, Battersby and Bolton (2013) emphasise the fact that non-verbal communication, including physical gestures, is essential in creating

connections and establishing a relationship between the performer and the
audience; the combination of physicality and emotional expression in gesture allows
for a deeper understanding of the character and situation (Battersby and Bolton,
2013, pp. 57-62), this is particularly valuable for audiences from different linguistic
backgrounds, as well as for neurodivergent or disabled experiences, who might not
necessarily connect with the traditional dialogue/script based performances shown in
mainstream theatre platforms. This relationship between both, can get deepened as
previously mentioned, by adding the layer of using music. "[…] bodies as a tool to
further their artistic and/or political vision" (McIvor and Walsh, 2024, p. 243), making
clowning not only a form of theatre, but beyond- of resistance. Clowning has been
recognised for its community-building and inclusive space, since it continually breaks
down boundaries between the private space of the theatre and the public space of
politics through individuals' potent use of the performing body as tool of not only
artistic expression but political agitation (McIvor and Walsh, 2024, p. 250), clowning
is not only performative, but it also is a tool to recognise, emphasise, re-humanise,
and break with the misuse of Power, to build those spaces for language,
communities, cultures, and Power.

 An interesting example of the political activist clown around the world is Clowns
Without Borders, charity groups of clowns who travel to countries in situation of War
and/or Post-War, where the children of the affected country are not motivated nor
find a reason to smile because of political war crimes, to bring them a bit of light.
Payasos sin Fronteras (Clowns without Borders) has been introduced and put into
practice in my homeland, Argentina, by clown Nanny Cogorno. Página 12 (1999), an
Argentinian newspaper made a note on the Argentinian clowns who have been

through Kosovo, Mozambique, Chiapas, and Ruanda. Some of them have been to Mozambique, with a *caravana de la risa* (which translates from the Spanish: a touring company who focus on making people laugh) for children and teenagers who have been abandoned or even ended up being orphans during the War. Others went to Río de Janeiro, creating a circus-like space for the affected children or as they called them, *meninos de rua* (which translates from Portuguese as 'kids from the streets') to have some activities to do in the circus for as long as they cannot get a home back. Cogorno explains, "Hay un lenguaje de gestos, de mímica y de señas que entienden todos los chicos del mundo" (paragraph under 2nd question) (my direct translation from Spanish: "There is a gesture language, mimical and signalled that all children in the world understand"). Nevertheless, the goal of Payasos sin Fronteras is not only to make children laugh again, but also to educate them in a way they can understand. Cogorno explains, "Un payaso puede decir cosas que otros no pueden. O llegar a determinadas explicaciones con el recurso del humor" (last paragraph under 1st question) (My translation: "A clown can say things others cannot. Or get to certain explanations with the source of humour"), for instance, the clowns first receive training, and they later teach the children how to survive by detecting and avoiding mines, using physicality in a way that what children see will get stuck with them. This method became effective from the realisation that, for example, if a dentist tells children they must brush their teeth chances are the kids will find it boring and will not do it. Yet if a clown manages to engage the kids in their clowning act of miming and exaggerating having a massive toothbrush and making it seem fun, the children are likely to get excited brushing their teeth. This example of Payasos sin Fronteras directly relates to the research aim of this dissertation on how

the clown does not only exaggerate silly gestures to make people laugh, but it also

can be and is in fact edge cutting, trying to save people by teaching survival methods

to affected children and populations involuntarily involved in political war crimes.

[Clowns without Borders in Bangladesh] (Educo, 2025).

Sound and Music: A Political Universal Language

 Just like gesture, music is yet another type of universal language which involves emotion and allows storytelling, making it inclusive for and to any culture and linguistics; setting up the atmosphere and theme of the play, hinting what is about to happen. In this case, the term 'music' refers at musical sounds such as live music and sound effects created by the voice and musical instruments that is performed by the clown, rather than a pre-recorded song. For instance, in one of the acts in Cirque du Soleil – Quidam (1996) (Cirque Du Soleil, 2024) which from the very beginning up until minute 1:25, it shows the clown expressing itself and presenting a balloon as well as playing with it, not only by being very physical, but also and most importantly by communicating constantly with sounds it makes coming from its voice of grumpiness and excitement. Stoll Knecht (2021) argues that music plays a fundamental role in performances by setting an emotional tone and providing the sounds to the physical actions heightening the emotional engagement of the audience, guiding their responses to the visual cues provided by the performer (2021, pp. 153-160). From rhythm, to melody, music allows a wide range of emotions, scenarios, and physical responses to happen. Sound in non-verbal clowning performances builds up to a deeper storytelling, making it not only more immersive, but also more inclusive towards the multi-cultural audiences that might be witnessing said shows. Music can be considered as a different way of following the

narrative that the clowns go through with their physical actions, as those are a response to the music itself.

 Dieffenbacher (2021) states that music is not purely a background accompaniment to set an ambience, but a vital component that helps to align the physical actions of the performer with the emotional tone of the scene (2021, p.236). Therefore, if during a scene there is a moment of suspense, the sounds playing might be just the one note playing on and on, leading to and maintaining the suspense. A good example of this, is the act Koblikov & Gashuk put together in "Le Plus Grand Cabaret Du Monde" (2014), in which from minute 2:30 until minute 3:00, one of the clowns is doing a sequence with a juggling club (or pin/baton) whilst his clown partner is playing the piano accordion, having moments of staccato whenever the juggler makes a movement too close to almost hit the musician. The mover is not dancing on his own, the same than the musician is not playing for himself – both clowns do their acts for each other, merging them together. Battersby and Bolton (2013) explain that the impact of music transcending languages, allowing performers to communicate with an audience on an emotional level rather than a linguistic one (2013, pp. 57-62). The emotional impact they refer to, being fundamental in non-verbal clowning performances, to be effective and efficient when it comes to make them inclusive for multi-cultural and multi-lingual audiences. It creates a deep connection between the performer and the audience. With the recently mentioned example, given the case their act was performed in an event in France, full of French people, yet the video of the act (Koblikov, 2014) was published online, where no matter what language the viewer speaks, the act, because of the non-verbality and music, can be easily understood by and language-speaker.

By exploring both points of gesture and sound in non-verbal clowning performances, musicians and actors, as well as theatre makers, can indulge in devising more theatre shows, in an inclusive way for cross-cultural audiences, as well as being able to collaborate with multi-cultural performers. Although there are practitioners who already communicate in a non-verbal way, such as dancers, puppeteers, and in physical theatre too, what I am offering to look more in depth with this dissertation is the clown- which not only it can be satisfactory visual but it also speaks truth to power, giving visualisation and a voice to those who got their human rights taken away.

[Clowns without Borders (Ireland) in South Africa, 2011].

Now that the explanation on music in clowning has been made, mostly using examples of the traditional clown for entertainment and slapstick gags, there is the other side of the clown- the contemporary one, who is the one who makes a clearer political statement, "The clown's role as observer and mimic of society offers a subversive form of resistance to forms of power that threaten human rights" (Ferguson, 2017, p. 146). As previously stated, clowning is often a subversive form of resistance; in the journal "Clowning as Human Rights Activism in Recent Devised Irish Theatre" Brian Fleming, native Irish bodhrán player, embodies his clown persona to bring marginalised groups located in Ireland together, representing those marginalised communities and controversial political issues. Fleming states that clowns "don't leave anything, they don't take anything away. They don't go as powerful people, they're not telling people what to do, they're Fools, people laugh at them" (2017, pp. 147-150). With barriers being broken down everywhere they went, such as in one of his trips to Senegal, where Fleming ended up communicating with local people through the playing of drums, reflecting as an exchange of music culture and unity of communities, as part of his journey as an activist clown in Clowns Without Borders. Fleming pointed out how on his trip to Senegal, he felt for the first time, as a white individual, what most black people go through when being the only black individual in a room full of white people. This time he was the only white person in a part of the country where there was a black community. He explains that, although no member of the community was intending to make Fleming uncomfortable or for him to feel left out, the linguistic, social, and racial class was like the elephant in the room. Nonetheless, Fleming indicates that he instantly felt integrated by the Senegalese community through music and the playing of a shared

instrument- the drum. Ireland and Senegal are so far yet so close in distance and culture however, united by one of the universal languages that is music. This example of Clowns Without Borders and the use of music refers to this universal language as a fundamental tool for clowns to reproach injustices, put the focus on marginalised communities, as well as to challenge power and the ones who have power, and use it as a tool for malicious crimes to happen in the world- for instance, most politicians. Marginalised communities are not the only communities where clowning have a great impact in by empowering the people affected by the injustice of the world, but also it does so in isolated parts of the society, such as elderly people who are in care homes/residences.

 In a study made in 2023, the research was based on elder clowns who are clowns that attend to care homes and residencies to provide different kinds of support to the elder, such as moments of laugh, distractions, and socialisation (Plez et al., 2023, p. 4). One of the people involved, located in Canada, went to a nursing home as an elder clown, where their approach as a clown was meant to build a connection with the residents whether they communicate in the same language or not. The English-speaking clown noticed the resident they were interacting with did not speak English and had vision impediments, for the resident was notoriously stressed and panicking. After trying different alternatives to interact with this person, the clown started to sing 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' gently, to which whether the resident was able to understand the song or not, it was the gentle melody that achieved for them to relax and even smile of wellbeing. Many residents find themselves with similar barriers, whether they are social limitations, visual/auditive impediments and/or communicative; however, the elder clowns with their ability to communicate in a

physical, non-verbal, and musical way, bring the residents an opportunity to get that

powerful need for social interactions (Plez et al., 2023, p. 5). Clowning and music

merged, collaborated and contributed with each other to transcend language

barriers, by getting deeper to the soul of an elder person who felt the emotional

depth of the connection made with the clown, who softened the resident's body

language and mind compared to at the beginning of their interaction, where the

resident was tense and stressed.

[Elderflowers – Elder Clowns] (Hearts and Minds, 2024).

In a similar line, different research made in 2024, claimed that the elements of clown
care are defined as empowering since it creates a connection between the clown
and the child, lifting the child's confidence and agency. This happens when the clown
promotes the medical procedures as if it was a game instead, therefore, the children
gets a clearer understanding of the process making it look less scary for the kid (Xin
et al., 2024, pp. 7-8); for instance, if the medical procedure requires the child to not
be tense for the doctor to make an injection, the clown's job is to distract the child in
a way the clown itself is also able to communicate with the doctor discreetly without
making the kid aware of that 'background' communication, this helping the doctor
give indications to the clown of what the kid's body position/posture must be like
depending on the moment of the medical procedure, as well as for the clown to
figure how to keep the child patient in a constant distraction of what is happening in
their body to not interfere with the procedure. There is an interesting connection with
this case to what Alcântara et al., wrote in their article, this being about the intention
of giving a better understanding to society on how clowns have a big impact with
hospitalised children with non-verbal communication- since the clown with its
performance, contributes positively to socialisation and interaction within children,
breaking down with the social isolation that comes naturally with hospitalisation
(Alcântara et al., 2016, pp. 433-434). Social isolation does not discriminate any sort
of age, race, culture, gender, ethnicity; and that was portrayed just now by examining
cases of cultural isolation in countries in times of either war or occupation, as well as
care residences and children hospitalisation, as mentioned in earlier examples given.
All those three examples deal with isolation yet clowning and music connects them
together in a form of resistance, noting how the clown has a better use and

understanding of power than many who govern us do. This is due to the clown not

having a place in the use of power as the government and politicians do but rather

using the concept to [em]power the people.

[The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army] (Ramsden, 2021).

Conclusion:

Growing up as a dancer and later in life indulging into clowning, I knew movement-based art forms are impactful for the performers to communicate with audiences on a deeper level beyond words/verbal communication are capable of. Yet I had my questions, such as how to explain why it was so effective every time I did a clowning performance. Therefore, I decided to use this opportunity on writing my dissertation to find those answers, and hopefully for the reader to be able to see the other side of the clown that is not just a commercial entertainer for children only, but rather a critical activist, who can provide visibility and voice to underrepresented, ethnically minorities and marginalised communities. Not only this research expanded the foundation of my knowledge on clowning in terms of its technique and dramaturgy, but it also provides different perspectives on how it communicates with a wide range of audiences from different ages, social class', races, ethnicities, and languages. I use hospital clowns to elder-clowns, and Clowns Without Borders as examples to articulate how sound, music, gesture and movement can communicate and address social inequalities around the world.

The most important challenge and limitation is about ethics of representation of clowns and their audiences. In this research, the challenges I have faced were the limited sources on clowns speaking truth to power, because of the censorship that exists on the internet and the algorithm when trying to look up for sources using specific keywords. It was for me realising the barely-existence of coverture given to activist clowns in the academic sources, which gave me not much option but to expand my research to non-academic sources such as websites, newspapers, online

videos, and interviews. Consequently, I had to question whether my representation of the clown was valid looking at the political power of the contemporary clown-particularly about the political side of sound music and movement.

My research contribution is about making the connection between the technical and political aspects of the contemporary clown who fights for social justice and peace in the world we live in, the one who does things without sense of shame nor censorship, who makes marginalised communities feel seen and heard, giving them visibility and help. As well as the clown that makes any human feel it is fine to fail and to be laugh at but to not let those actions run them over, instead to get up, and keep walking with confidence; because that is what clowns do- they solve problems whilst failing. Clowning is a highly embodied form of comedy- whether is verbal or non-verbal. Society must understand the parallel we have with clowns and embrace it.

I am proposing next steps in the academic environment, since majority of the theatre degrees in the United Kingdom do not have modules of/related to clowning. I suggest including the contemporary clown in terms of its technique and political power would be an empowering step to take. Not being at this stage as of 2025, I see this as a lack of progression in the academia and in its curriculum development, when putting it in perspective and how effective and affective it can be having a clowning module for higher education. As I mentioned at the very beginning of this dissertation, this research came from my embodied perspective of a clown who is a young, female, able-bodied, immigrant student in the United Kingdom, trying to fit-in in the academic environment of an English university.

I had to find my own way through the degree with no linguistic support, and the system does not seem likely to change any time soon- that is because not many have yet raised their voices to fight the power and the system. I wrote this dissertation and aim to take further steps soon to make a change in the system, because no student should feel excluded nor laugh at, simply because of a language barrier. The power the highly embodied form of comedy that is clowning must be funded and represented better by the higher entities. Giving the clowns the time, space, and opportunity is an investment to the future of the society. Education must change. The system must change. Power must be broken.

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