

Walkabout Physical Comedy: Using the Gifts of the Moment

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“All the world’s a stage . . .”

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (Act II, Scene VII)

My clown doctor rounds as Dr. Fun E. Bone at Salem Hospital provide endless opportunities for play with the people I encounter – patients, medical and hospital staff, visitors, families, volunteers, even delivery service employees. Windows of curiosity and play naturally occur in the rooms I visit in Pediatrics, the Emergency Department, and the Intensive Care Unit (ICU . . . “I see you, too!”) and Surgery waiting rooms. But, I’ve discovered there are even more fertile grounds for humor and comedy and ‘heart-to-heart resuscitations’ during my walkabouts, when I’m moving from place to place amidst ever-changing human and physical environments and conditions.



I park in the hospital parking structure, step out of the car with gag-filled medicine bag in hand, and from the moment I’m in public view, I’m in character. I’m Dr. Fun E. Bone. (I may not know if someone or anyone is watching and engaged, but I assume that someone always is.) I navigate stairways, several buildings, numerous waiting rooms and lobbies, escalators, skybridges, and elevators before I actually check in and start my clown doctor rounds. Dr. Fun E. Bone walks funny, shuffling feet in short quick steps, leaning forward enough to always be off-balance, in a hurry but not quite knowing where he’s going or why. His calling cards are gentle humor and physical comedy, and his role is to support the healing process, relieve some of the stress of the hospital experience, and tickle funny bones to distract from and counteract feelings of fear, sadness, and helplessness.

Physical comedy is right at home in the hospital because it springs from our physicality, the things our bodies do (including our vulnerabilities and foibles), and our interactions with physical objects. By adjusting the sound and intensity to hospital and bedside-appropriate levels, the clown (doctor) becomes a visual, non-verbal performing artist in constant give-and-take with patients, staff, other people, and properties.

Dr. Fun E. Bone’s walkabouts are essentially running performances, using the obstacles, physical structures, and moments of interaction with people as gifts and prompts and opportunities for play. As partners in play, we improvise and create the script together along the way.

Here’s what can happen during a typical clown doctor walkabout:

Silly greetings and waves to staff, patients, and other passers-by. Shoulder taps and hide-and-seek. Hugs. Exploding fist bumps. Shared rides on elevators, perhaps with a playful plea to share a breakfast or a seat on a wheelchair. Shared walks down hallways and across skybridges. (“Do you wanna race?”) Inquiring if someone had called for “a second opinion.” Playfully loping cavorts down long sets of stairs. Exaggerated hop-on and hop-off of escalators. Ridden backwards, at times. Well-placed and timed jumps to land on the trip pads for sliding doors to

'magically' open them. Impromptu smile inspections. Handing out numbers in waiting rooms (always #1, unless someone else wants one, too, and they get #2 . . . get it? too . . . two . . . groan).

For example, this happened the other day during one of my walkabouts:

After a little romp down a long staircase, I suddenly stop on the last step to gather myself before hopping down with an overwrought sense of dramatics, relief, and self-satisfaction. This much-exaggerated 'jump' down the last was rewarded by an unexpected but nice round of applause from the receptionists and volunteers at the front desk. But, after I waved gratefully to thank them and turned on my heels to head out the door, I was stopped in my tracks by a call for an "Encore!" Wait; what? What am I supposed to do right here for an encore? I can't do the same bit again . . . think, think, think, come up with something, quick . . . no wait, don't think, just do! (This entire internal monologue and rah-rah session lasted a split second.) Using that gift from an 'audience' member (and thanking him for throwing it out there by using it), I stopped in my tracks and 'reversed the tape,' rewinding my walk back to the bottom of the stairs, paused to gather myself, and hopped backwards up the first/last stair (luckily, my timing and spacing was right and I 'stuck' the landing!). Quite naively (and genuinely) surprised with myself, I then re-executed the 'jump' off the last stair (to more applause) and went about my way on the walkabout over to PEDS.



Not too surprisingly, I sometimes have to pause to wipe a few beads of sweat forming on my brow from those bits of physical comedy business during the walkabout over to PEDS, the Pediatric Department, where Dr. Fun E. Bone begins his clown doctor rounds for the day. After a couple of centering breaths, a brief prayer, greetings to the PEDS nursing staff, and a quick inventory of the patients and rooms who might like a visit from Dr. Fun E. Bone (including those in isolation for whom I clown from the doorway), we're ready for clown doctor rounds. And 'the stage' then becomes intimate and bedside in each patient's room, which is treated like that person's special space and domain.

After PEDS, walkabouts take me to rounds in the Emergency Department and several waiting room areas before heading back to Volunteer Services to check out. (And that's followed by an off-the-clock but very public walkabout all the way back to my car.) During those walkabouts, physical structures like escalators, elevators, skybridges, waiting rooms, hallways, and lobbies provide ever-changing 'stages' for play and interaction and gentle humor and healing laughter.

Every walkabout is different in its own special way due to the ever-changing 'cast' – the patients, visitors, medical staff, and volunteers who are 'partners in play' with the clown doctor – as well as the environments and conditions at the hospital.

Much of the magic and spontaneity that happens during walkabouts can be chalked up to the grace of serendipity, but it can also be attributed to being aware, in the moment, and open to the gifts and windows of opportunity that people and the environment give and provide you. Life can be wondrously surprising!

Do you have walkabout opportunities in your clowning? What kinds of bits or gags or schtick can you use during those walkabouts? Have audiences or situations or physical environments given you any 'gifts' of something magical or unexpected that you were able to respond to spontaneously and incorporate into your performance?

Clown on, my red nose friends! Make magic your next performance. And don't forget to play.

Mike "Buster" Bednarek tours throughout the Pacific Northwest with his zany mix of physical comedy and illusions called *Buster's Red Nose Revue*. He's served on the staff at numerous clown camps, festivals, and conventions. After a 34-year career in Oregon schools, and before he grows up, he's now clowning full-time. In his spare time, he bikes without falling, squeezes the concertina with mixed results, and gets taken for frequent walks by his dogs.

Visit him on the web at www.busterthec clown.net or www.facebook.com/BustertheClown.