

What I learned last summer (part 1 of 2)
Or, How a 33-year clown vet got schooled in one summer
by Mike “Buster” Bednarek

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[Dear Reader: I began this article as a blog post with a pretty simple premise, but it evolved into a reflective learning exercise for me that kept finding new thoughts, perspectives, and verbiage. Originally published on my web site as a four-part series, it appears here in *The New Calliope* in two parts. Put on a nice pot of green tea and come along for a retrospective on Buster’s summer schooling. A big red nose thanks in advance for your time here! I welcome and appreciate your comments and reactions. Mike “Buster” Bednarek]

Summer had just ended and school was starting, an exciting time for kids (and parents) – a time to reconnect with old friends, make new ones, and shake off the summer brain cobwebs. Kids generally start the school year with a writing assignment along the lines of “What I did this summer.”

For me, a busy summer performing season had also just ended, so I was thinking about the same thing. After all, the summer of 2013 was my first full-time immersion into clowning after 33 years as a part-time clown due to my full-time career in public education. In that spirit, my musings about the summer took on a reflective spin, looking beyond what I did to what I learned.

I may have known many of these things before. But I hadn’t really learned them to the point that I actually knew that I knew them and DID them until now. In no particular order, here are nine lessons I learned this past summer:

1. There’s routine and rigor and play to good rehearsal.
2. A show is a guided journey.
3. Know the show.
4. Listen to the audience.
5. Know the venue.
6. Don’t assume anything.
7. Learn from every performance.
8. Have a support system.
9. There is no ‘off-season,’ just different seasons.

Let me explain. But first, a little background on what led up to that busy, lesson-filled summer.

The summer of 2013 actually started in September 2012 at a showcase attended by hundreds of librarians from Oregon and Southwest Washington who present young audience performances. A five-minute performance led to an invitation to perform at all the library branches in Washington County (suburbs and towns west of Portland) for their 2013 Summer Reading Program. Wow! The opportunity and the challenge stunned me, and the bar was set pretty high.

Serious (OK, clowningly serious) planning, preparation, working out and getting in shape, routining bits, and rehearsal started right after the first of the year. July 9, 2013 was circled on the calendar as the first scheduled performance. I had hoped to have the whole show put together by June 1 – script, individual bits, props, music, and show logistics – so I could spend a solid month in final rehearsal. While it seemed like a nice plan, it didn’t factor in a little health blip in late March.

A suddenly irregular heartbeat led to a pacemaker implant mid-April and a four-week recovery period. But, the good news was that the heart itself was strong; it just had a misfiring electrical system. My ‘choice’ was to deal

with it and move on. It meant some catch up in conditioning, so I put in the time on the bike and in the studio space I had cleared in the garage, and by mid-May, the rehearsal schedule was back on track. Physically, I felt better than ever.

There were going to be many opportunities to learn from the summer's clown gigs. Just staging and performing a solo 45-minute themed show was HUGE. Audiences would range in size from 60 to 350 people, and the demographics would be a mix of suburban, rural, Latino, preschoolers, school-aged 5 to 18, day cares, and families. Venues were indoors and outdoors – some nicely air-conditioned multipurpose spaces in the libraries, others were outdoors and off-site in public parks in the blazing sun and humidity. (This just happened to be the warmest summer I can remember in my 38 years in Oregon, with no rain at all for a 45-day stretch from late June to August.)

Now that I look back and reflect, with seven weeks of summer reading program library shows under my belt and with a shrunken waist line, I've learned and grown as a clown performing artist. Some readers, especially those of you who are more seasoned veterans of clowning and performing, are probably going to be thinking, "Ha! You rookie!! Welcome to Big Boy Clowning!!!" as you read this article. That's OK; I kind of felt like a rookie and made some rookie mistakes at times last summer.

Here's some detail on the first five lessons learned (I'll discuss lessons 6 through 9 next issue):

1. There's routine and rigor and play to good rehearsal.

I do physical comedy. I work hard while performing and demand a lot of myself physically. However, at 58, my body doesn't stretch as well, flex as much, or heal as quickly as it did 30, 20, or even 10 years ago. In preparing to perform a busy summer slate of shows – many two a days, sometimes as many as five in three days – I had to get in shape to meet not just the physical demands, but also the performance demands.

Up to this year, I'd been a part-time clown, pulling shows and performances together in fits and bursts as needed. With expectations, stakes, and demands now suddenly sky high, I had to be disciplined about a regular schedule, focused effort, and performance-level intensity – all injected with a healthy dose of play, curiosity, and discovery – during each rehearsal to properly prepare for the summer shows.

I had to "practice how you play," as they say in the sports world.

As the calendar approached July 1, I felt ready to bust out. I could hardly wait until that first show date on July 9. In retrospect, I remember thinking that scheduling a dress rehearsal in front of a live audience would have been a good idea. Then, out of the blue, as if by grace and serendipity, a call came from another library for a last-minute replacement on July 2. I jumped at it; I was ready.

2. A show is a guided journey.

A show should take the audience (and the performer, for that matter) on a guided journey. Each audience and audience member is a gift. They've given me 45 minutes of their lives to take them on an entertaining ride to places they've never been before!

I wanted to construct my show with a sense of adventure that started the moment I hit the stage. At times, depending on the audience and situation, I used the pre-show to play and improvise, introducing my character, warming up the audience, building trust, prompting curiosity, and setting the tone for what was to follow.

The clown enters reading a book. (These performances, after all, were part of each library's Summer Reading Program.) His misadventures help him and the audience "discover" how a clown looks, how a clown acts, and what a clown does.

Everything in the show's structure – including sequence, flow, rhythm, pace, intensity, scripted routines, and unscripted opportunities for play – had a purpose. It projected the clown's character, introduced conflict, moved the storyline along, or created moments of play, resulting in a shared roller coaster ride experience.

3. Know the show.

The show had to flow naturally and effortlessly. I had to really 'know' the show and its mechanics, not just commit it to memory but be able to perform passionately, energetically, and relaxed, without having to consciously think about it. That would allow me to stay 'in the moment' and focus on the audience.

The show had to reside and breathe and spring to life from the clown's sub conscience. To get to this level, it meant repetition, focus, and intensity throughout rehearsal, ingraining the show in the clown's muscles, mind, and soul.

I had to master and internalize the show's storyline, routines and set pieces, music soundtrack and cues, and its physical properties. I had to map the physical layout of the stage into my internal GPS and know where I was at all key moments in the show.

Two weeks before the show was to make its debut, I had a wild idea. I wanted to conclude the show with a song accompanied by the ukulele. I don't speak when I perform, I can't really carry a tune, and I don't play the ukulele. I didn't even have a ukulele, but I had the chords and lyrics for the song, so why not?

Convinced I could pull this off, I bought a ukulele, took online lessons, and practiced for a few days. That was long enough to realize that learning to play an instrument, sing along to it, perform a song in public, do it 'in character,' incorporate it into the show, and do it effortlessly was going to take a LOT longer than two weeks to be able to pull it off, let alone in the midst of putting the finishing touches on the show itself. That wild idea was moved to the back burner for rethinking after the summer season.

4. Listen to the audience.

Without an audience, there is no performance. We share the same space, the same time, the same experience, even the same stage. And in clowning, there is no distance between performer and audience, because we share laughter.

I wanted the audience to be an interactive partner at every performance. Their participation and reactions give cues and direction and, at times, a resounding "ha!" to spontaneously new ideas. Their laughter is reinforcement. They give me permission to play and invade their space. They are fellow performers, at times unwittingly (and maybe even unwillingly)! They help me perform magic, discover order in the chaos, and succeed in the face of insurmountable odds. Each and every audience member is brought into the spotlight vicariously when one of them steps on stage.

Throughout those summer performances, I really made an effort to listen to (and watch) my audiences. They taught me many lessons, including: 1) warming them up built trust and a spirit of play, 2) when to drop a bit that wasn't hitting the mark, 3) when to run with moments of unscripted play (like uncontrollable giggles to a simple butt waggle), 4) how to play 'large' without speaking in a public amphitheater or park, and 5) the importance and strategy of pre-selecting 'volunteers' and performance helpers.

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(Red nose tip: Know what you need for each of your interactive bits, scope out the audience during warm ups, and make mental notes for selecting 'volunteers' at the appropriate time.)

5. Know the venue.

As a performer, part of my preparation was to know what I was walking into for each show – the audience, the physical setting, and the conditions. I knew I was facing a wide variety of performance spaces. Some were going to be indoors at the libraries themselves – from multipurpose rooms to clear-out spaces. Some were going to be indoors but off-site from the libraries, such as churches and community halls. Still others were going to be outdoors in spaces like plazas, amphitheaters, and parks.

To preview all the spaces and introduce myself to the presenters, I did a two-day blitz through all the libraries before the season started. Talking points included: 1) anticipated audience, 2) performance space logistics, 3) sound system and/or electricity, 4) pre-show arrival and setup, 5) crowd control (I don't bring my own roadies or bouncers!), and 6) anything else they wanted me to be aware of prior to my performance. I figured if I knew the venue spaces going in, I'd be comfortable and prepared for them the day of the show.

The indoor venues could easily accommodate my show, but the outdoor venues would be full of environmental distractions – fountains, traffic noise, other outdoor activities nearby, and the full array of summer weather conditions like sun, heat, humidity, and wind. I made three notes-to-self:

- 1) Outfit yourself accordingly, since even the indoor settings were likely to be warm during the summertime.
- 2) Have an adequate sound system for the show's music whether I'm indoors or outdoors.
- 3) Be prepared to perform the outdoor shows differently than the indoor.

To be honest, the outdoor venues made me a bit anxious after previewing them. As a non-speaking performer, I'm far more comfortable in an indoor, theater-like setting where the audience is focused, the 'stage' is defined, and the background music can adequately provide atmosphere and tempo. Outdoors, in an open air setting, things change. I'd have to work harder to grab and hold the audience – louder (tough to do non-verbally), quicker, bigger, more visual, and more interactive.

I must have adapted, because the outdoor shows turned out to be among my best all summer! The performing juices rose to meet the challenge. I turned the music up, worked hard (man, do I ever sweat!), projected 'bigger' and more visually interesting on stage, got physically into the audience so the whole venue became the 'stage' (which I tend to do, anyway), and kept changing the audience's and my focus to keep their eyes and minds engaged. In three of the five outdoor shows, things were going fine until the heat (90+ degree sunny afternoons) won at about the 30-minute mark, melting the audience attention span, collective energy, and the show's momentum. (Note #4 to self: Physical comedy performances in the summer afternoon sun? Really?!)

My boom box, with its port for my iPhone and the show's music, worked great as a stand-alone sound system in all the indoor venues except one, a cavernous church multipurpose room. The size and ceiling height in that room swallowed my 'boom' at the far edges and back of the room. There, and at all the outdoor venues, a loudspeaker or more powerful sound system was needed. One of the outdoor performances, at a community park, was the only one supported by a sound system provided by the library. That happened to be one of the shows that really soared! I invited that library staff to be my road crew for the rest of the summer (they laughingly declined).

A postscript to the sound system: I picked up a portable Bluetooth loudspeaker on sale at Costco at the end of the summer, so now I'm ready for the bookings for future large room and outdoor venues to start pouring in. Too late for last summer's shows, though.

So, that's part 1 of the story how Buster went to clown performing arts reality school last summer and got schooled. In the next installment of this piece, I'll explain and reflect on the final four lessons learned at the Summer School of Clown Knocks. Look for it in the next issue of *The New Calliope*.

Until then, peace through belly laughs!

Mike "Buster" Bednarek

[Mike "Buster" Bednarek tours throughout the Pacific Northwest with his zany mix of physical comedy, balance, and illusions called *Buster's Red Nose Revue*. He's served on the staff at Clown Camp™ at the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse, Comedifest, NW Festival of Clowns, and Clowns of America International (COAI) regional and international conventions.

Mike also is the creator of Red Nose Festival Competition, or simply Red Nose, which helps participants become better, more complete clowns through performance showcases and constructive critiques that focus on their strengths, as well as suggestions for improvement.

Recently retired from a 34-year career in Oregon schools, he's trying to decide what to do when he grows up. Or, if he even wants to grow up at all. He is blessed with a loving, flexible, and forgiving wife, three daughters, three grandchildren, two schnauzers who own him, a recently-plumbed colon, and a red nose. In his spare time, he cycles without falling (very often), squeezes the concertina unmercifully, and gets taken out back by his dogs Charlie and Onnie.

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