

**What I learned last summer**  
**Or, How a 33-year clown vet got schooled in one summer**  
**by Mike “Buster” Bednarek**  
[COAI submission 2013-11-13]

*[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. It was originally published on my web site as a four-part series but appears here in all its full lengthiness! Put on a nice pot of green tea, relax, suspend your attention span, and come along for a ride looking-back at Buster’s summer. A big red nose thanks in advance for your time here! As always, I appreciate your comments and reactions.]*  
Mike “Buster” Bednarek]

Summer had just ended and school was starting. It was an exciting time for kids (and parents!) – a time to reconnect with old friends, make new ones, and shake off the summer brain cobwebs. One of the first classroom writing assignments is generally a take on “What I Did this Summer.”

A busy summer 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.

First, a little background on what led up to the 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 15 library branches in Washington County (suburbs and towns west of Portland) this summer. Wow! The opportunity and the challenge still stun me. 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 17 summer reading program library shows under my belt – two more were added at the last minute – 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 through this article. That’s OK; I kind of felt like a rookie and made some rookie mistakes at times this past summer.

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.**

I do physical comedy. I work hard while performing and demand a lot of myself physically. At 58, the 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 slate of shows this summer – 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, Buster was 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, and I’ve got 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 (props and stage). I had to map the physical layout of the stage into my internal GPS and know where I was and where I needed to be at all key times and 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 air, the same experience, the same stage. In clowning, there is no distance between performer and audience, because we share laughter.

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

This summer, 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 (a Hamlet-esque skull with a red nose visual gag that never hit the mark), 3) when to run with moments of unscripted play (uncontrollable giggles to a simple butt waggle), 4) how to play 'large and loud' without speaking in a public amphitheater or park, and 5) the importance and strategy of pre-selecting 'volunteers' and performance helpers. (Red nose tip: Know what you need in the way of size, age, maturity, physical dexterity, strength, playfulness, trust, and self-confidence for each of your interactive bits, scope out the audience during come-ins and warm ups, and make mental notes for approaching and selecting them 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 2-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 two 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.

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 #3 to self: Physical comedy performances in the summer afternoon sun? Really?!)

My iHome 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 diffused 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 this summer's shows, though.

## **6. Don't assume anything.**

Friends, family, and colleagues know me as a list maker. I'm organized, and I generally leave nothing to chance. To-do lists, grocery shopping lists, trip packing lists, Netflix lists. For my summer season shows, I had a 'bits' master list, a show order list, and a stage setup check-off list.

But, 10 minutes before my very first show, I realized that I'd forgotten to pack a very important prop – my "How to Be a Clown" book used as a visual at the beginning of the show! Freak!! Lucky for me, I was in a library – so if you're going to forget a prop in a library, make sure it's a book. Five minutes later, after a quick forage through the Children's Section, a teen volunteer came back with an armful of books. I even had choices! Whew. Clown butt saved.

Each show this summer meant a 45-90 minute drive from home – definitely road shows. Forget something and don't realize it until you're setting up? There's no turning back. Either improvise, drop the bit, or sub in a backup routine. A detailed, itemized packing list was added to the pre-show routine to make sure I did not forget a prop again.

But, even packing lists aren't foolproof (fool . . . clown . . . get it?) if you assume you've got it burned in the memory banks but don't actually check things off. "When you assume, you . . ." I'm sure you've heard that one before. Toward the end of the summer, I fell victim to my packing assumptions again. This time, I was shocked to realize that my newspaper props were back at home on the worktable 30 minutes before show time. Lucky for me (again) I was in a library, where there are newspapers and all kinds of creative arts materials in the backroom. A handful of helpful library staff, some fast-acting and improvised prop construction, and 20 minutes later, that clown bacon was pulled from the fire, the show went on to gales of laughter, and I gave thanks for the grace that made it possible.

I learned a few additional things not to assume this summer:

- 1) GPS directions can sometimes lead you into dead ends on the wrong side of a park (so allow extra time).
- 2) Traffic volume can vary greatly at different times of the day, especially in large metropolitan areas like Portland, wreaking havoc on Google estimated driving times and best routes (so allow extra time).
- 3) As smart as they may be, iPhones do NOT know when to put themselves into Airplane Mode. An incoming call halfway through one show reminded me of that (so make sure it's on your stage setup check-off list, note to self #4).

## **7. Learn from every performance.**

Every performance is good, because there's always something to learn, grow from, and improve on. A little learning method I use is: 1) Observe, 2) Think about, 3) Apply, 4) Do, or OTAD for short.

After each performance this summer, I took time to think back on how things went, what I (and others) observed, what went well, and what didn't go so well. I captured these observations in writing in a journal, and used those notes to debrief (think about) the performance and plan for improvements and/or changes (apply). Rehearsals and performance routines were then tweaked (do!) so I could continuously improve. And then the OTAD cycle would start all over again as I observed and journaled how the changes worked the next time performed for an audience.

This article is a direct off-shoot of that journal.

There was another writing routine that I did right away after each performance – sending 'Thank You' notes as soon as possible. A Greek proverb says: "The swiftest gratitude is the sweetest." While the performance was still fresh in my mind, I thanked the presenter for having me, noted something fun that happened, expressed gratitude for anything supportive they did, and invited them to have me back "anytime!"

## **8. Have a support system.**

As a solo clown performing artist, I'm not only performer, but also writer, producer, stage manager, tech crew, stage crew, roadie, security guard, webmaster, publicist, and sole proprietor of a small business. That's a lot for one person to do, let alone do well.

I discovered early on that I'd need a solid support system of 'heroes' in order to deliver the level of performance I wanted. My wife, Sharon, supported my transition to full-time clowning after my (third and final) retirement

this spring. She respected my work out and rehearsal time, accompanied me to my more challenging gigs, gave honest non-performer feedback, and took pictures. She is my red nose (and life) guardian angel.

My kids, while grown up and out on their own, also were supportive, and even the three grandchildren made it to one performance and met and experienced 'Buster' for the first time. There's a grin-inducing, heartwarming peace knowing that your family supports a two-footed immersion into clowning!

Payaso amigos and master clowns Angel Ocasio and Albert Alter became mentors and cheerleaders (pardon the momentary flashback on old SNL skits), providing constant verbal support and feedback. They convinced me I could do this through huge doses of red nose confidence boosters, as well as ale for positive reinforcement. They are friends for life.

Unexpected grace blessed my support system this spring in the form of a cardiologist who worked quickly to diagnose my heart arrhythmia and perform pacemaker implant surgery, allowing me to barely miss a beat (pun intended) in rehearsing and preparation for what was to be, for me, a demanding summer season of performances. Amen, alleluia, and can I get a big, "Woo hoo!"

It probably goes without saying, but every audience became an ad hoc member of my support system, as I discussed in '**4. Listen to the audience**' above.

All of you are my red nose heroes; I love and appreciate you all!

To round out my support system, I made sure I had a set of internal, self-sustaining supports in place, too. I set aside and dedicated the time to work out to get and keep the clown in shape physically and mentally, ate well and kept the clown healthy, prayed and gave thanks, and relaxed and refreshed and occasionally did other things to stay happy and balanced, such as gardening, volunteering at a children's parade, attending a concert, and getting out of town for a weekend. All work and no play makes Buster a dull clown (or something like that).

### **9. There is no 'off-season,' just different seasons.**

At the end of the summer season, I was energized! I was pleased with my performances, audience response, what I'd learned and how I'd grown as a clown, and my head-first plunge into full-time clowning. Excitedly, I asked "OK, now what? What's next? What do I do in the off-season?"

Then, the voice of red nose reality shouted in my ear, "Whoa, there, big fool! There is no 'off-season' when you're a full-time clown, just different seasons!"

Prepping for the summer and the frequency and level of performing it called for, I had very little time (or vision) to look past summer. Now that I have some time to think about it, look to the future, and build a full-time, all-seasons practice in the art of clowning, I can think of a ton of areas for focus and effort and "what's next."

They include:

1. Continually practice and improve routines, gags, and set pieces.
2. Make adjustments (perhaps simplify, but no need to completely re-do routines or show).
3. Get and/or stay in shape with regular, rigorous workouts and practice.
4. Fix and repair props and clothing; build new physical properties.
5. 'Season' the show and routines for different holidays, seasons, and themes.
6. Tickle my own funny bone (read the comics, attend a show, watch old movies and TV shows).
7. Study the art (read books on clowning, take a class or workshop, get coaching).

8. Enrich and expand my clown skill set by learning something new (ukulele or concertina, perhaps?).
9. Market, promote, and communicate through a variety of media to create future audiences.
10. Put something back into the art (such as teaching, writing, coaching, or volunteering).

So, now you know the story about how Buster went to clown performing arts reality school last summer and got schooled. What's next after this Summer School of Clown Knocks? That's TBD! Whatever it is, bring it on.

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 and areas suggested 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, 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 schnauzers Charlie and Onnie.

Visit him online at: [www.busterthec clown.net](http://www.busterthec clown.net) or [www.facebook.com/BustertheClown](http://www.facebook.com/BustertheClown)]