

**What I learned last summer (part 2), or
More on how a 33-year clown vet got schooled in one summer
by Mike “Buster” Bednarek
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[Dear Reader: This is the conclusion of a two-part article on how this clown veteran got schooled last summer. Part one appeared in the previous issue of *The New Calliope*. It gave an overview on my first full-time immersion into clowning after 33 years clowning part-time, as well as an in-depth look at some of the lessons learned. Part two finishes off that retrospective. A big red nose thanks in advance for your time here; I welcome and appreciate your comments and reactions. Buster]

Last September, I took a deep breath, reflected back on my busy summer clowning, laughed, and realized that I’d been schooled!

After performing seven weeks of summer reading program library shows for a wide variety of audiences, I knew that I’d learned a lot, grown as a clown performing artist, and shrunk my waistline. If you are a more seasoned veteran of clowning, you’ll probably be thinking, “Ha! You rookie!! Welcome to Big Boy Clowning!!!” as you read through this piece. That’s fair, since I made quite a few rookie mistakes at times last 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. Here are the nine lessons I learned last 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.

I talked about lessons 1 through 5 in part 1 of this article, so here’s a little ‘splaining on lessons 6 through 9:

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 last 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. Doofus! 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 last summer NOT to assume:

- 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 (note to self: make sure it's on your stage setup check-off list).

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 what to continue doing and what to improve and/or change (apply). Rehearsals and performance routines were then tweaked (that's the 'do!' part) 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 last spring. She respected my work out and rehearsal time, accompanied me to my more challenging gigs, gave honest, non-performer, retired elementary school teacher 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 last spring in the form of a cardiologist who worked quickly to diagnose a 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' in part 1 of this article.

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 make 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. When I finally had some time to think about it, look to the future, and build a full-time, all-seasons practice in the art of clowning, I could 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?).

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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 that Summer School of Clown Knocks? That's still a work-in-progress! Whatever it is, bring it on.

Keep 'em laughing,
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 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, 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.

You can e-mail him at busterthec clown@comcast.net or visit him online at www.busterthec clown.net or www.facebook.com/BustertheClown.]