



## PRAISE FOR *THE ART OF CLOWNING*

“*The Art of Clowning* provides readers with a clear and empowering guide to the world of clowning. It provides sound advice and exercises for any actor, clown or not. This book is easy and fun to read, and is a useful addition to our field. I particularly appreciate the material on the clown’s relationship to the audience, an area I consider much overlooked and of critical importance to any stage actor.”

—Sanford Robbins, director of the Professional Theatre  
Training Program, University of Delaware

“*The Art of Clowning* is an invaluable training resource manual for would-be clowns in high school, college, and university classes, and in any number of clown festivals currently proliferating around the world. Simon, an internationally known director and teacher of acting with his own clown troupe, has given us a clear, straight-forward description of how to find one’s ‘inner clown.’ This wonderful book reveals a passionate devotion to the importance of clown work, not only in creating clown characters, but also in helping actors transform themselves into any theatrical roles: from clowns and villains to heroines and tragic monarchs.”

—Michael Flachman, professor of English and director of the Hawk  
Honors Program, California State University, Bakersfield

“*The Art of Clowning* positively vibrates with joy and inspiration. Simon’s writing is clear, spirited and accessible; even the table of contents is beguiling. His step-by-step instructions are designed for both a performer working alone and for a collaborative team of performer and trainer, and will guide even the shyest novice to discover her own unique clown personality.”

—Leslie Bennet, professor of movement, Department of  
Theatre and Film, University of Kansas

“Simon beautifully articulates his thoughtful and systematic approach to the serious investigation of clowning. The clearly defined progression guides the reader to playfully and safely uncover his/her clown, and deepen creative, artistic expression.”

—Peter Hadres, artistic associate, Pacific Conservatory of  
Performing Arts





“Simon—in his instruction, in his life’s work and in *The Art of Clowning*—brings the depth and soul back to clowning that follows the lineage from Pierrot through Chaplin and Skelton. This book shows the purity and love of clowning. Simon reminds us why clowns are the very essence of theatre and why so much of good acting and storytelling is non-verbal. My only regret is that I didn’t have a chance to be trained by Eli when I was young and learning. Every actor and writer should read this book!”

—Zoot Velasco, New Vaudeville performer, artistic director,  
Muckenthaler Cultural Center

“What a great resource for actors and performers! You will learn to create an intimate connection with your audience, find the stripped-down truth in your performances, and actually enjoy committing to failure. *The Art of Clowning* is the blueprint for finding and deepening one’s inner clown. There’s something here for actors at every level, those just starting out and those of us who have been clowns for a while. This book is packed with fruitful exercises and illuminating information on the history and background of clowning.”

—Crista Flanagan, actor/comedienne, star of MADtv

“Simon’s vast experience as a director, teacher, and clown trainer makes *The Art of Clowning* a joyful journey to one’s inner clown—the soul of any performer. His exercises constitute an enlightening journey of self-discovery, a veritable roadmap to connecting with audiences of any size. Whether your ultimate goal is Shakespeare, modern theatre, film, or television, Simon’s experienced, supportive, and humorous voice points you in the right direction.”

—Andrew Hill Newman, producer/writer, head writer for *iCarly*

“*The Art of Clowning* is the next best thing to having Simon in the room next to you when you are exploring the clown’s world. Simon is direct and generous in opening up the whole spectrum of the clown to actors both experienced and novice. His natural zest and love for the actor as clown literally springs up from every page. Read this book, follow Simon’s treasure trail and you will be drawn into yours and others’ private and yet so public clown world.”

—Kevin Crawford, director, Accademia dell’Arte, Arezzo, Italy



# THE ART OF CLOWNING





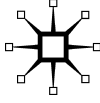
# THE ART OF CLOWNING

ELI SIMON



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*Dedicated to my parents, Frayda and Justin Simon,  
who protected me from clowns, real and imagined*





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Finally, a silent bow to my clown troupe, CLOWNZILLA: Adrian Alita, Cambria Beilstein, Adrienne Mueller, Betsy Mugavero, RJ Romero, Dane Svenningsen, Alexander "Grande" Phillips, Courtney Harper, Heraclio Pimento, Frank Miyashiro, Elizabeth Graziano, Daryn Mack, and Benny Wills.

Photographs by Eli Simon and Michael Hooker featuring the CLOWNZILLA troupe.



# INTRODUCTION

*If by chance some day you're not feeling well, you should remember some little thing I have said or done and if it brings a smile to your face or a chuckle to your heart then my purpose as your clown has been fulfilled.*

—Red Skelton

**W**e all have a clown living somewhere inside us. Sometimes our clown energy is readily apparent; sometimes just lurking beneath the surface of our consciousness; sometimes buried so deeply that nobody knows where it came from, who it is, or what makes it tick. This book is about discovering and exploring your inner clown, reveling in its utter uniqueness and using clown techniques to venture out in new directions as a person, performer, and artist.

## THE ART OF CLOWNING

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What follows in these pages is an advanced treatise on clowning that expands on the theories and exercises I introduced in my earlier book *Masking Unmasked: Four Basic Approaches to Acting*, “Clowning” (chapter three), published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2003. Clowning is mask work—the nose is a partial face mask—but it is quite different from full-face and half-face masking. In the latter forms, you are encouraged to lose your “self” behind the façade of an “other.” Clowning reveals profound aspects of your *own* persona, often called your “inner child.” This is a training regimen as

emotionally transformational as full-face masking, as wildly comedic as half-face masking, and as revelatory as any system of training in or out of a mask.

Although my previous writing on clowning contributed to an overview of masking techniques, this book illuminates a complete system of clowning that encourages exploration, expansion, and fortification of your distinctive clown persona. A natural result of these investigations is the development of *original* clown routines performed alone or in partnership with other clowns. If you are interested in exploring and inhabiting your unique clown persona, the techniques described herein demystify the process, yielding swift and deep access to the clown in you.

## CLOWNING REWARDS

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If you have trepidation about being reduced to a maniacal clown who freaks out the neighborhood kids, fear not: There are many beneficial reasons to engage in clowning and you don't need to become a weirdo along the way. Clowning steadily encourages you to

- deepen your sense of truthful conviction
- perform with a high level of energy and commitment
- remain connected to your partners and audience
- risk, fail, and become vulnerable
- make moment-to-moment discoveries
- express deeply felt emotions
- stretch your range of playable actions
- follow artistic impulses.

Interestingly, these are the precise areas of growth that any serious Stanislavski-based actor-training program addresses, and most well-designed acting programs here and abroad are based, at least in some measure, on Stanislavski's seminal theories of acting.




Yet, clowning differs in significant respects from traditional acting classes such as scene study, acting in styles, and auditioning skills. One of the basic differences is *audience awareness*. In typical non-clown acting classes and performances, actors are expected to focus on their scene partner, objectives, and tactics, while the audience is more or less blocked from the conscious mind. Actors are rarely asked to break the illusion of what we commonly refer to as the “fourth wall,” the imaginary division between stage and audience that keeps performers isolated in their imaginary world. This makes sense because the audience does not exist in the living rooms, kitchens, or backyards of “well-made” plays. In clowning, the shoe is on the other foot: Clowns must always remain aware of those who are watching. This knowledge allows them to consciously and conscientiously bare their souls. So, clowning not only permits you to rediscover your playful self, but it also allows you to share meaningful discoveries with your audience. The potency of this communion can be a life-altering experience.

As one of my clowns-in-training recently said, “Clowning is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced in acting. It’s scary but revelatory—like walking a tightrope and not knowing where my steps will lead. Ultimately, I feel an amazing sense of power as a performer. That experience has affected me deeply as an actor onstage and off.” Clowning will have the same kind of impact on you but the work is something that must be *experienced* to be understood. In other words, though it may be helpful to understand clowning from an external point of view, the best way to ensure that your clown is imbued with truthfulness, vulnerability, and emotional depth is to commit yourself to serious engagement in the exercises.

## CLOWN POWER

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As you venture into the rich and rewarding world of clowning, take heart in knowing that you cavort in the footsteps of a diversely



talented collection of comic and tragic clown performers. Indeed, clowns can be fun-loving or sad, eccentric or everyday, clumsy or coordinated, witty or dumb. There are as many types of clowns as there are people that inhabit them. Clowns reach back to the earliest records of ancient Egypt. They played the fool for the rulers of the Roman Empire. They performed as court jesters in the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, they dazzled royalty and commoners alike with diverse skills such as juggling, music, dancing, and acrobatics. Donning multicolored costumes, the zanies of Europe in the 1500s became multitalented professionals who excelled in puppetry, magic, contortion, and trickery. Shakespeare freely weaved clowns, jesters, and fools into the fabric of his plays. Many of Shakespeare's clowns were profoundly clever. Perhaps the most famous of these wits, King Lear's Fool, sagely pointed out that the real fool was the king. In Italy, the clown mutated into Arlechino—one of the stock tricksters of the *Commedia Dell'Arte*. In France, a white-face clown, Pierrot, was born. The striking look of this face had a lasting impact on generations of clowns to come. A natural outgrowth of European street performances was the circus, a place where various performers—including white-face circus clowns—entertained the masses.

When most people think of clowns these days, they conjure images of crazy-looking guys in baggy pants, oversized shoes, orange hair, and garish makeup. Although these Bozo-type clowns have their place at circuses, children's parties, or selling hamburgers, they are not the kind of soulful clowns you will likely develop using this book. To begin with, you don't need to dress up in whacky costumes to prove you are goofy enough to be a clown. We'll work for quite a while with just the nose, sans makeup (simple costuming elements and white-face will be introduced after you are well underway). You'll be amazed at the transformational power of this small red mask. Along with the nose, all you need for starters is a basic black outfit and an eagerness to learn. You can train alone, in public, or in a classroom setting, as described in the book.

#### 4 | THE ART OF CLOWNING



## YOU MUST BE KIDDING

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When you are clowning, your kid-spirit is at play. Initially, you may not recognize your kid-spirit, yet moments of kid-discovery will surface unexpectedly. “Hey,” you think, “this clown is oddly familiar.” Of course, objectively speaking, you know your clown emanates from *you*. Yet, clowning is not a mere manifestation of your current state of being. Many of your clown’s deepest attributes are tied to childhood experiences, summoning primal emotions, thoughts, and images. The red nose is like a lifetime permission slip from the principal—everything is fair game now.

Interestingly, once released from the confines of “acting” like a normal grown-up, clowns become *omnipotent beings* who express and evoke deep emotions. They reflect the truths of life on earth by creating luminescent routines based on banal events such as tying shoes, reading books, or chewing gum. They also address serious issues such as political assassinations, family strife, and drug wars. While reflecting the idiosyncrasies of our world, clowns behave and misbehave as suits their mood at any given moment. They are uniquely suited to reflect the past, present, and future of mankind. They have the option of diving into the center of a melee or remaining aloof and commenting on it. It may seem trite to say that clowns hold a mirror to our lives but, in fact, they are uniquely suited to do just that.

## BIRTH

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It’s impossible to forget the birth of a clown—those precious, fragile moments when an actor begins to realize his or her clown’s potential. Indeed, the emergence of a clown is as breathtaking as that of a newborn baby. “Look at that clown,” you think, “now *that* is someone we’ve never met before—a being that could only be conceived in the wildest of dreams.” It’s equally enthralling to witness the multiplicity



of clown personas contained within any randomly selected group of students. Indeed, each new clowning class or workshop yields innovative clown personas; the range of these qualities is as diverse as human nature itself. At least one of the reasons the work is so riveting is that no two clowns are alike. This should not come as much of a surprise because we are individualized as people (non-clowns), and clown essences, as a matter of course, arise from the cumulative experiences of our “real” lives on earth. Sure, some clowns are basically happy while others are sad, some are high status while others are low, and some are energetic while others are slothful, but beyond these rough categorizations, clowns exhibit kaleidoscopic permutations that defy simplistic categorization. There’s just no predicting what will happen when you put on a red nose.

Take heart in this: Nobody can inhabit your clown except *you* (nor can you inhabit someone else’s clown—tricks can be stolen but personas cannot). Emmett Kelly, Buster Keaton, Imogene Coco, Sid Caesar, Madeline Kahn, Richard Pryor, Charlie Chaplin, Red Skelton, Danny Kaye, and Lucille Ball were unique unto themselves. Just as there’s only one of them, there’s only one *you*. Whether you are clowning to broaden your acting skills or embark on an odyssey of personal discovery or whether you fulfill your dreams as a silent performer, a Shakespearean fool, or a zany in a spotlight-filled circus, the soul of your clown belongs to you alone.

As thrilling as it is for me to assist in the birth of a new clown, I am doubly thrilled to share this artistic process with you. My only regret is that I won’t be there to witness your remarkable emergence. However, I find a measure of comfort in knowing that you will be deeply connected to *truths* rather than just gags. Your clown will emanate from your inner life, and at the same time, it will remain closely connected to the outside world. In this way, you’ll never be isolated—either from yourself as a clown, fellow clowns that you cavort with, or the audience that laughs, moans, and weeps along with you.

## 6 | THE ART OF CLOWNING