

## The Clown and His Therapeutic Play. Le Rire Médecin

Antonella CORNICI\*

**Abstract:** The clown, often referred to as the "perfect actor," possesses a remarkable ability to improvise, a crucial skill in communicating with the audience. The evolution of the clown has been long and complex, culminating in excellent theater therapy within medical settings. Thanks to a scholarship obtained through the European Erasmus Program, I had the opportunity to participate in meetings with therapeutic clowns in Nancy, France, through the welcoming organization Le Rire Médecin. Observing the activities of these clowns at the Children's Hospital in Nancy, their interactions with patients, their families, medical staff, and all hospital personnel, was an astonishing experience for me as an artist and educator. Theater therapy employs improvisation and other theatrical techniques to explore and address personal issues, develop self-confidence, and even address some cases of depression and anxiety. Clown therapy can bring joy, having a positive impact on mental and emotional health, offering individuals a break from the worries and pressures of daily life.

**Keywords:** clown, Le Rire Médecin, therapy, improvisation, nonverbal

### Short Biography of the Clown Character

The clown is often referred to as the "perfect actor" for several reasons. Clowns rely on facial expressions, mime, and exaggerated gestures to communicate with the audience. This mode of communication transcends linguistic barriers, making them understood by a diverse audience. One of the primary goals of a clown is to bring laughter and joy to the audience. Their ability to provoke laughter is often considered a supreme form of art. They are masters of expressing pure emotions. They can bring out and exaggerate emotions, be it joy, sadness, fear, or surprise, to connect with the audience in a profound way.

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\* Associate Professor PhD, George Enescu National University of Arts, Faculty of Theatre, Performing Arts - Direction

# THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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Clowns must have a great ability to improvise to quickly respond to the unpredictable reactions of the audience. This skill is essential in comedic performance. They are often viewed as vulnerable and authentic, allowing them to connect with the audience in a sincere and personal way.

The art of the clown is unique and complex, and the actors who portray these characters are appreciated for their artistic abilities and genuine humor.

The clown has a long and varied history with origins dating back through the centuries. It seems that the origins of clowns can be traced back to ancient performances (Greek and Roman theater) where there were comical characters with elements of mime and exaggeration.

In the Middle Ages, clowns began to develop into humorous characters in street performances and festivals. In the 16th century in Italy, with the appearance of Commedia dell'Arte, clowns evolved, becoming recognizable characters such as Arlecchino and Pulcinella, characters that contributed to the evolution of the clown character.

In the 18th century, clowns became a common part of circus performances, such as those produced by the Grimaldi<sup>1</sup> family in the UK, considered the precursors of modern clowns.

In the 19th century, the circus became a popular venue for clowns, and the clown character evolved, becoming recognized with colored hair and extravagant costumes.

The evolution of the clown is a long and complex one, with contributions from numerous cultures and historical periods. Clowns have continued to adapt and change over time, so their cultural and artistic diversity remains an important part of the history of entertainment.

## **Clown Therapy - Le Rire Médecin**

Clown therapy is a form of complementary therapy that uses humor and play to help people cope with stress, anxiety, and pain. These "clown therapists" work in various settings, including hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Grimaldi (Clown Joey), the most famous English mime and clown. The first make-up of clowns in the style that we can still see at the circus was done by Joseph Grimaldi. His memoirs were published after his death by Charles Dickens.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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This type of therapy began to develop in the 1970s but became more widespread between the 1980s and 1990s. Initially, it was introduced in pediatrics and later expanded to other medical fields.

The first notable clown therapy program in a hospital was founded by Michael Christensen<sup>2</sup> and other clowns in 1986 at San Francisco General Hospital. Since then, this form of theater therapy with the help of clowns has spread worldwide. Today, it is a widely used therapy in hospitals, care centers, and other medical institutions to bring joy and comfort to patients. It's important to mention that clown therapy is supported by research showing its benefits in reducing stress and improving the well-being of hospitalized individuals.

A clown therapist can interact with hospitalized children, helping them forget the anxiety related to treatment or medical procedures. They can bring joy to nursing homes, contributing to the residents' well-being. Clown therapists also work with patients recovering from surgery or accidents, helping them regain confidence and improve mobility through playful activities and amusing exercises.

Clown therapists are trained in communication and relationship-building techniques, as well as how to create a safe and fun environment for their clients. Clown therapy can have a positive impact on the mental and emotional health of individuals, providing them with a break from the worries and pressures of daily life.

A clown therapist is a specially trained artist who works in medical or care settings to bring joy and comfort to patients. Here are some key aspects that a clown therapist should be aware of:

- *Ethics and Confidentiality*: A clown therapist must respect patient confidentiality and act in accordance with ethical standards in medical environments.
- *Nonverbal Communication*: Clown therapists rely heavily on nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions, body language, and gestures, to interact with patients.
- *Cultural Sensitivity*: It's important for a clown therapist to be aware of cultural diversity and respect the values and traditions of patients.
- *Flexibility*: Situations can vary in medical settings, so a clown therapist needs to be flexible and adaptable to different contexts and situations.

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<sup>2</sup> Clown, juggler, circus director

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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- *Artistic Skills*: Clown therapists are essentially artists and should have skills like mime, simple magic tricks, singing, and dancing.
- *Empathy*: Empathy is essential for understanding the needs and feelings of patients and providing support during treatment or recovery.
- *Training and Preparation*: Most clown therapists undergo specialized training programs to learn how to work effectively in medical and care environments.
- *Equipment and Hygiene*: In medical settings, hygiene and safety rules are essential. Clown therapists need to be aware of hygiene regulations and take care of their equipment.

Following an Erasmus scholarship on the topic of "Therapeutic Clown Study," I had the opportunity to participate for a few days in the interventions of clowns at a children's hospital in Nancy, France, thanks to the project's partner organization, Le Rire Médecin.

Le Rire Médecin is a French non-governmental organization founded in 1991, focusing on bringing joy and amusement into the lives of hospitalized children. "Râsul ca Medicament" (the organization's name translated) has the primary mission of using the power of laughter and entertainment to improve the well-being of children in the hospital. The organization's volunteers, called "Docteurs Rêves" or "Doctors of Dreams," are specially trained artists who visit hospitalized children, offering them funny stories, games, and entertaining activities. These interactions have a positive impact on the children and their families during challenging times.

"Le Rire Médecin dreams of a world where every child in the hospital, regardless of their condition and the severity of the illness, will always find cheerful friends who know how to listen, understand, and help them go through the hospitalization period as smoothly as possible and find the resources within themselves to overcome the disease."<sup>3</sup>

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3 <https://www.leriremedecin.org/nous-connaître/qui-sommes-nous.html>

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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Clown *Giselle* – Andreea Vizitiu



Clown *Quiche* - Elodie Hatton



Clown *Luigi Vegas* - Bruno Salvador



Clown *Bolov* - William Masson

photo credit: Le Rire Médecin

Caroline Simonds is the founder of Le Rire Médecin. She was a medical student in the United States and later became a street performer in Paris, where she discovered the art of clowns. Her first appearance in a Bronx hospital was a real surprise; her clown character was a turkey...

To become a therapeutic clown, an actor should undergo specialized training in clown therapy or participate in courses and workshops focusing on nonverbal communication, improvisation, simple magic, and developing empathy. They should also learn about the ethics and specific rules that apply in medical environments.

Therapeutic clowns present in hospitals are not qualified medical personnel to intervene in emergency situations. They cannot provide medical

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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treatment or respond to critical medical situations, but their presence has a positive impact on patients and their families, even in challenging situations. Collaboration with the hospital's medical staff is crucial to ensure that patients receive an optimal approach, taking into account their physical and emotional needs in relation to their diagnosis and medical interventions, whether past or future.

Specific training in clown therapy and patient interaction is usually more important than a particular acting technique. Trainers and instructors in clown therapy can integrate elements from various acting methods. For example, during my internship in Nancy, the clowns participated in a training workshop based on the Michael Chekhov method.



Workshop on the Michael Chekhov method supported by Natalie Yalon <sup>4</sup> - Le Rire Médecin, photo credit: Antonella Cornici

Michael Chekhov's method is an acting technique that focuses on imagination, physical expression, vocalization, and movement. All of these elements are crucial in clown therapy because clowns primarily communicate nonverbally. The Michael Chekhov technique provides actors with a set of creative tools that can contribute to the evolution of the art of acting and the

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<sup>4</sup> Actriță, regizor și profesor de teatru. Este specializată în regie și pedagogie teatrală cu formatori de la Gitis din Moscova, la Institutul Vakhtanghov, la școala Anatoli Vassiliev și la Studioul de actorie Michael Cehov din Moscova.



## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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infusion of authenticity into performances. The Michael Chekhov method is not limited to theater but is also applicable to film, television, and other artistic mediums. Actors who study this technique can develop their expressive skills, gain a deeper understanding of their characters, and create authentic and powerful interpretations.



Workshop on the Michael Chekhov method supported by Natalie Yalon - Le Rire Médecin, photo credit Antonella Cornici

It's important to understand that clown therapy is a distinct form of performance that focuses on bringing joy and comfort to patients in medical or care settings. Therefore, actors aspiring to become therapeutic clowns must be willing to adapt their skills and knowledge to provide support in sensitive and stressful situations.

The clowns at Le Rire Médecin are professional actors specially trained to work in medical institutions. They first arrived in France at Gustave Roussy and Louis Mourier Hospital in Colombes. Currently, over 130 clown actors work with hospitalized children in the Île-de France region as well as in several cities across France. Behind each actor, there is a personal story.

# THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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## Stories and Games of Therapeutic Clowns

### *Story with Characters*

A therapeutic clown can enter a sick child's room and start a story in which they portray a funny character. For instance, the clown might play a detective on a quest to find "the cold" or "sadness," creating an entertaining narrative in which the child is involved in solving the "mystery." The stories and improvisations are simple with unexpected and amusing situations tailored to each patient.



*Clown Giselle – Andreea Vizitiu și Clown Luigi Vegas - Bruno Salvador (Nancy-France Children's Hospital, photo credit Antonella Cornici)*

### *Balloon Magic*

Clowns can create balloon animals or figures and offer them to patients. These can be animals, flowers, or anything else that brings a smile to the patient's face. Often, these balloon tricks are replaced by games with various other items found in the hospital. Therapeutic clowns can use simple magic tricks to surprise and delight the patients. These tricks may include object appearances and disappearances or other simple illusions.

### *Word Games*



## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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Clowns can engage in word games or riddles with patients. For example, they might initiate a game where the patient has to guess the correct word from a letter puzzle. These games promote interaction and fun.

### *Songs and Dance*

Clowns can sing cheerful songs and invite patients to dance with them. This can boost morale and provide a pleasant break from the medical routine.

### *Individual Interactions*

Therapeutic clowns can provide individual attention to patients by listening to them and communicating in a friendly manner. They can encourage conversation and try to create a memorable moment for the patient.

### What to Expect from a Clown When Interacting with a Patient?

"Kindness - is one of the main qualities expected from a clown actor recruited by Rire Médecin, essential for dealing with the challenging situations experienced in the hospital. We want every clown actor to be aware that they always intervene to improve the well-being of both the children and their families, as well as the medical care team. They always act with respect for the work of the medical and healthcare teams.

Creativity - allows clowns to express all their artistic qualities during personalized room performances. It also enables the association to envision new programs in maternity wards, in pediatric emergency units, and in home hospitalization.

Humor, as well as poetry, imagination, fantasy, and dreams, are what a clown duo brings to the hospital.

Transmission - is part of the DNA of Le Rire Médecin, which created the Rire Médecin Training Institute in 2011 and then established Clown Play Training in healthcare institutions (JCES). We continue to recognize the profession of therapeutic clown and contribute to increasing the number of children who benefit from the actions of clown actors."<sup>5</sup>

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5 <https://www.leriremedecin.org/nous-connaître/qui-sommes-nous.html>

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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(Clowns from Nancy at the Children's Hospital, photo credit Antonella Cornici)

Le Rire Médecin is an eloquent example of how humor and laughter can be used as therapeutic tools to improve the quality of life for patients, especially in the case of children facing medical issues and extended hospital stays.

"Our team of professional actors is carefully trained. Initial and ongoing training is essential to work as a clown in a hospital. Any actor who joins the association receives several weeks of initial training to understand, learn, and adapt their performance to this specific environment. Le Rire Médecin offers monthly artistic or theoretical training courses. All actors come together for sessions and group discussions led by a personality from the artistic or medical world. Coaching sessions are beneficial for clown actors as they are observed by an association actor whose mission is to stimulate the artists' creativity and optimize the duo's performance."<sup>6</sup>

Around the world, there are several similar organizations to Le Rire Médecin that use humor and entertainment to improve the well-being of patients: The Patch Adams Gesundheit Institute (founded by the humorist doctor Patch Adams) aims to bring joy and humor to the medical world

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6 <https://www.leriremedecin.org/nous-connaître/qui-sommes-nous.html>

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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through entertainment programs and medical staff training. Clown Doctors International (Clowns Sans Frontières) operates globally and sends specially trained clowns to hospitals worldwide. The Big Apple Circus Clown Care, Theodora Foundation (Switzerland), and Red Noses International are among these organizations.



(Clowns from Nancy at the Children's Hospital, photo credit Antonella Cornici)

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