



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Scholarship Through Performance - Part Three: Clowns and Clowning 1

Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Union Theological Seminary, NY*

Blog Series: Embodied Teaching

August 23, 2023

Tags: embodied teaching | performance | BRAZIL | clown | play | Manoel de Barros | Clowdio

*The mother noticed the boy tenderly.  
She said: My son, you are going to be a poet.  
You will carry water in your sieve your whole life.  
You will fill voids with your naughtiness  
And some people will love you for your nonsense  
-Manoel de Barros<sup>[1]</sup>*

If you have followed my two last blogs, I am adventuring into new forms of scholarship and for that I am entering into the realm of performance, clowning, and ecology. The play I am putting together is about a clown called Wajcha (Quechua for orphan) who is searching for Pachamama, his ultimate belonging. Since I am turning Wajcha into a clown, I need to understand the life of the clown. A note about Wajcha will come later in the process, but what is a clown?

The figure of the clown has always enchanted me. My father was a clown, without paint, red nose, or big clothes. He had the Buddha's smile. And he made everyone laugh. Because of him I learned to like the circus, which was cheap to go see, and I fell in love with the art. He loved cinema, did theater, and was a writer, poet, and musician. He played the violin, guitar, and harmonica. It was from him that I learned to laugh. With him I learned to like Charlie Chaplin,

Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, and the Three Stooges. In Brazil, the clown that most marked me was named Arrelia. He always started everything by asking, "How are you, how are you, how are you?" And everyone said, "Okay, okay, okay." It was the beginning of many laughs.

Then I grew up, became an adult, grew stupid, and forgot about clowns. It was during COVID that the clown that inhabited my father his whole life came to visit me. There was so much sadness in the world that I needed joy and laughter. In this search, I had to wrestle culturally: to be a clown and to laugh are both cultural expressions. Living in the United States has changed me in ways I still don't know. But what I know is that I found my voice here. Strangely enough, living here made me bigger, extravagant, multiple, and shameless, to the point of naïveté, and bold. It was through my immigrant persona that I found a deeper part of myself. On the other hand, living here also made me quieter, suspicious, and more serious, not knowing exactly who or what to trust. It definitely made me more fearful. And it is in between these two worlds within me that my clown showed up. My name should be "Clowndio"!

The figure of the clown holds a multiplicity of selves: extravagance and exaggeration, silliness, lack of shyness, and excessive naïveté. How can one be a clown in a prudish, moralistic, and tense society? Or how can one be a clown in a very proper, serious, rational, academic world that also creates so much fear? While humor thrives in so-called proper places, humor does not survive fear. When humor is done with love, it stretches boundaries and casts out fear. If humor is connected with love, then as Saint Augustine says, "Be humorous and do what you want." For humor is not "anything goes," but rather a very careful craft of attending, paying attention to, and caring for those around you.

Still, humor is not that simple. Humor is cultural and most of my Brazilian sensibilities do not fit here. My family here will say how embarrassed they often are with me. To find humor in another culture is to find its heartbeat and it is so difficult to get when you didn't grow up in that place. And yet, humor is also universal in its specificities.

I hate how clowns are portrayed on Halloween in the US. They are terrifying! I hate this relationship between clowns and horror. But after studying the history, I understand that it includes the the terror-striking clown. This helped me understand the Halloween clowns even though I can't stand them. It is said that Stephen King wrote *It*, about the horrifying Pennywise the Dancing Clown, after he found out that clowns are what scare children the most. I couldn't believe it! However, King was right to portray a clown as a shape-shifting monster dealing with a void, and with its own "macroverse." That's true! The clown is not just a sweet person; they carry within themselves abysses and monstrosities.

I, however, want something very different! I want my clown to touch the horrors of the world and return them as laughter, lightness, and silliness. I want a clown who pays close attention to the disasters of the world but interprets these disasters in a way that people can engage with and not shut down. I am fine with boredom, but I can't stand boring things. There's nothing worse than boring people. I want to be funny, at least for a few!

Funny, joy, laughter, silliness: these are all forms of power against capitalism, which is the most potent producer of sadness in our time! The current demand for happiness everywhere is a symptom of this very sad society. No, happiness is not the measure of a good life, but to laugh is an antidote to the forces of death that keep pressing us down into places lacking joy and energy.

My clown emerges as an anti-capitalist character wearing flowers and a green nose as he searches for Pachamama. Sure, Wajcha doesn't know what he is doing, and in that way we are very similar! All he wants is to make someone laugh and pay attention to the land.

The clown is a person who feels a lot, who feels more than they should.  
They feel something, as the song<sup>[2]</sup> says,

*That springs forth from their skin*

And they ask:

*What is it that happens to me?*

The clown knows that they need to go where the people are, where children (small or big) are. Then the clown may even paint their face and do some tricks and, if you ask why the clown does it all, they'll say: I don't know, I don't know what this is *springing forth from my skin*.

*What is it that happens to me?  
that rises to. my cheeks and makes me blush?*

The clown receives the heart of someone and carries it with care. The clown blushes with joy, never with shame. Holding life is a unique event; the clown blushes with the charm of the simplest things.

*What is it that happens to me?  
that jumps out at me, betraying me?*

The clown sees too much but doesn't realize that what they see multiplies and remakes itself into other things that no one else sees. The clown is naïve. The clown doesn't work in linear ways, but keeps looping in symbiotic moves. The clown betrays systems of profit. Fully present in the place, the clown doesn't have much need for anything. A little flower becomes the clown's whole world! The clown follows a bee around the world. The clown falls in love with a cactus and makes their life in the desert.

*What is it that happens to me?  
that squeezes my chest and makes. me confess?*

The clown is a confessor of their own stupidities, mistakes, limits, naïvetés, disappointments, sadness, and loneliness...

And as a confessor, the clown opens to the confession of all the frailties of the world. The clown is a collector of peoples' stories. As Zuca Sardan said, "The clown is the ultimate priest." A disguised prophet, a compassionate one, a coyote trickstering communities, an ambassador without citizenship, a foreigner without a country, the clown despises nations.

*What is it that happens to me?  
What can no longer be concealed?*

The clown is incapable of hiding; what you see is what you get.

The clown is so honest that they can't help but be a tremendous pretender.

"He pretends so completely that he even pretends that the pain he really feels is pain."<sup>[3]</sup>

And he also pretends that it is joy that makes everyone laugh.

*What is it that happens to me?  
That's not right for anyone to refuse?*

No, the clown does not understand the refusal of a smile and is stubborn until they succeed. With their annoying galoshes! For the clown has only one law: It is declared that everyone is given not only the right, but fundamentally, the duty, to laugh!

*What is it that happens to me?  
That makes me a beggar?  
makes me plead?*

The clown leaves their home, paints themselves, dresses in strange clothes as if begging for a smile, even if only from the corner of someone's mouth. Every clown lives off the crumbs of other people's happiness. And it is this joy that makes them beg for any smile.

<sup>[1]</sup> Manoel de Barros, excerpt from the poem "The boy who carried water in his sieve," in *Exercicios de Ser Criança* (São Paulo: Editora Salamandra, 1999).

<sup>[2]</sup> This is a conversation with the song "O Que Será que Será" ("What Will Be Will Be") by Chico Buarque.

<sup>[3]</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *A Little Larger Than the Entire Universe: Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2023/08/scholarship-through-performance-part-three-clowns-and-clowning/>