In The COVID Era Can Clowns be *Remotely* Funny?

Twelve approaches to creating Physical Comedy on Zoom and YouTube

By Will Weigler

In the COVID era, can clowns be *remotely* funny?

Twelve approaches to creating physical comedy on Zoom and YouTube

For more about the author, see page 29. Will is available for workshops, residencies, lectures, performance/devising coaching and mentoring both online and (soon, we hope) in person.

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Several examples of clown routines described in this guide were among the final presentations from the clown course at the Dell'Arte School PTP and MFA1 class of 2020. Thanks to School Director Lauren Wilson and the following students for permission to use their images and descriptions of their work.

Aurora C. Gooch	Emily-Ann Hopkins	Maria Sotiropoulou	Sigrid Norheim Ørntoft
Claire Aldridege	Kit Solowy	Rachel Wansker	
Cuon Kim Nguyen	Liu Ho Man	Sean Lang	

Table of Contents

Introduction

Starting in the mid 1930s, radio dramas flourished when producers began to recognize how to take full advantage of that particular medium. A rich use of sound effects, and characters sharing their intimate, internal thoughts with those sitting at home, were just some of what made the experience of a listening to radio play succeed on its own terms rather than a pallid substitute for live theatre and motion pictures. I propose that we find ourselves in a similar situation today when it comes to staging physical comedy online. Instead of accepting virtual physical comedy performances on the video screen as inevitably second-rate versions of what would be better live on stage, we can tap into what this medium can offer us on its own terms. This is especially relevant during this global pandemic as we find ourselves isolated from one another and internet-based performances are coming into their own like never before. What follows are twelve suggestions for staging physical comedy or clown routines that rely on the unique properties of a live or pre-recorded performance on Zoom, YouTube or other online platforms. While most of these approaches will apply to performing physical comedy and clown in general, they are all particularly geared to promoting online laughs. Many of these suggestions will be familiar to experienced performers. My hope was to create a basic vocabulary, based on the best of what I have seen in online physical comedy, in order to make the concepts more accessible for crafting effective work.

As a theatre director and playwright, I often incorporate visual comedy, physical comedy, physical theatre, and found objects into my scripts and my work with actors. Although the suggestions in this guide are intended to apply to any type of online physical comedy performance, for the sake of economy in writing I will refer to the performer simply as ***the clown***.

The world of the clown is often a place of bewilderment—being baffled by forces in the world that seem intent upon making them stumble and fail. The saving grace of clowns is that they can meet their challenges with open hearts and open imaginations equipped with the capacity to redefine the world they encounter on their own unconventional terms. And in the act of reconfiguring their relationships with hardship into genuine curiosity, discovery, and delightfully unexpected solutions, they invite audiences to embrace this attitude, too. In these fraught times, when serious barriers and challenges

are rising up to challenge us at every turn, the inventive perspectives of clowns and physical comedians are more important than ever. It is my wish and my hope that the staging strategies in this guide can be used to encourage performers to channel their personal visions of resilience through online performances that are as hilarious as they are enlightening.

These twelve staging strategies are divided into four categories:

- **Framing the Gests**
- **Working the Edges**
- **Cultivating a Relationship with the Viewers**
- **Playing on the Zeitgeist**

A brief introduction to *Gests*

A fundamental aspect of online-based comedy performance is the rectangular window that borders the clown on all sides. Giving extra attention to what goes in this frame can encourage you to strip away all but that which is most essential in your routine. Chaplin and Keaton showed us how clarity is linked to hilarity in large part because paring away all the excess allows viewers to connect vividly with the specificity of the clown's bewildering situation. The Latin word ***sāgiō*** means, "to perceive quickly; to discern acutely" and it relates perfectly to the aspiration of clowns in relation to their audiences. When your viewers are with you moment-to-moment, keenly grasping the nature of each predicament you're facing, and breathlessly anticipating (or being surprised by) your unconventional responses, they are beside themselves with glee. You can take advantage of the focused frame of internet-based physical comedy by devising and placing within it clearly crafted images that are inherently funny.

It's one thing to strip away excess, but a more positive, activated approach involves intentionally finding a way to identify the ***gist*** of the clown's relationship with someone else (or with elements of the world around them), or perhaps the gist of their social status at that moment, or the gist of a contradiction they are facing, and distill all of it into one single physical action: one ***gesture***, one image, or one sound. This fusion of the ***gist*** of something and a single ***gesture*** that perfectly embodies the sense of it, it is known

as a ***gest***. Pronounced with a soft "g", the concept was introduced by the maverick twentieth-century theatre director, playwright, and poet Bertolt Brecht.[1]

The key to crafting successful gests is found in the words "perfectly embodies." It can be a fun and invigorating exploration to work out single images that will distill the complexity of big-picture ideas. Some riveting examples of gests in performance were seen in a 2019 contemporary stage adaptation of Upton Sinclair's novel, ***The Jungle*** at Toronto's Tarragon theatre. In one scene, Veronyka (Shannon Currie) was telling her husband Jack (Matthew Gin) about her rough day at her low-income, thankless job. In the midst of the scene, while preparing their Friday night supper, she cut open an avocado revealing that it was all brown and rotten inside. She burst into a rage: at the money she had wasted; at the green grocer for assuring her the avocado was ripe and ready to eat; at the injustice of having to eke out a living to survive and never getting a break. What other food would have been as perfect as an avocado in that scene? From its outward appearance, an avocado perfectly embodied a special, end-of-the-week treat and then as the actor sliced it open, everyone could see all that promise wrecked and all that anticipated potential betrayed. The playwright found just the right object to embody so much in one fell swoop. Later in the play, Veronyka and Jack splurge on a rare weekend holiday to Montreal. In the passenger seat of the car, Shannon Currie incorporated another object-based gest when she took a lipstick from her purse. The way she held the lipstick and applied it, her face beaming, perfectly embodied the specialness of the occasion: Veronyka's relief from the day-to-day drudgery of their lives and how she felt right at that moment. Although these two examples are from a dramatic play, developing the ability to recognize, craft, and incorporate gests in one's work can be an invaluable part of the toolkit of any physical comedian or clown. In my experience, once actors begin to grasp what gests are and how they work, they find themselves recognizing gests they've already created intuitively in their own material, and also start to spot them everywhere they look in their daily lives.

[1] For more details and background on the term *gest*, see the sidebar *Brecht's gestus*.

Brecht's *gestus*

Gest is an English translation of the German term ***gestus*** (pronounced like ***guest-us***). There is no direct equivalent word for it in English. Brecht's English language translator John Willett chose the archaic English word *gest*, which refers to the way one carries oneself. He was pleased with the choice because, as he explained it, *gest* is an existing word that cleverly combines gist and gesture, which is the essence of its meaning.[2]

When historian John Rouse wrote about Brecht's theatre company, The Berliner Ensemble, he argued that there was no "special magic" to how they were able to achieve such impactful performances. The actors and director and scenic designers simply developed a knack for inventing and refining one gest after another during rehearsals. Their shows were filled with a series of individual moments (***einzelgeschehnis***) they had crafted that were often hilarious and breathtaking at the same time because each beautifully chosen gest revealed to the audience so much about characters' relationships, emotional states, or social circumstances in the stories they were telling.[3]

Brecht made an important distinction between what he called ordinary gests and social gests. For him, an actor might find an ordinary gest—a single physical action that brilliantly captures the character's experience at that moment, and it may well dazzle the audience with its clarity about the human condition. However, his aim was to reveal not only what the characters were facing but also the social circumstances that had imposed those conditions upon them. Brecht wanted these social gests to shed light on the nature of oppression so that audiences could vividly perceive and critique society's status quo. Brecht also used the term gest to describe all the ways the actors can build physical elements into a role that will make it crystal clear to the audience how society shapes their characters' motives, choices and limitations.

I have witnessed many extraordinary moments in performance by actors with different levels of training and experience. They discovered just the right physical action that so quintessentially captured relationship, mood, attitude or situation that audiences burst out in laughter with a profound recognition of what they were seeing. For our purposes, these ordinary gests will suit us well enough.

[2] John Willett. (1959), *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht: A Study from Eight Aspects*. (London: Methuen, 173.
[3] John Rouse. (1982), Brecht and the Contradictory Actor. *Theatre Journal*, 36(1), 36–37.

A well-crafted gest can pack a wallop even when it's just a static image, as demonstrated in this black and white photo by Patrick Joust.[4]

In any number of other positions of the teddy bear on that street, it would have been merely a toy. By choosing this one evocative physical gesture, Joust has found the perfect arrangement to sum up the inner world of a lovable stuffed bear in the depths of despair (and to utilize the potent contradiction of our expectations). This is a gest of a feeling.

[4] Patrick Joust. (2010). Sad Bear [Digital Photo]. Patrick Joust. (https://patrickjoust.com)

Visual artist David Shrigley has a particular genius for crafting images that hold contradiction to make a deeply comic impact. When I first saw his photograph "Balloon,"[5] my instant reaction was: Awww, that's so sweet!

In the broadest sense of the word, this image is a physical *gesture* of cozy comfort, and it invites us to respond according to our associations with those qualities. The artist has orchestrated the image, selecting just the right objects and placement so that we are drawn into experiencing the sense of ***sāgiō***. We instantly feel what Shrigley is intending because these clues and cues—the pillows, bedcover, and facial expression—combine to form a visual gest. But then, of course, we catch ourselves and acknowledge that it is only a silly balloon with a few marker pen lines on it. We laugh for having been suckered into the warm fuzzy feelings. This delightful image, holding both sweetness and cynicism, is a gest of contradiction.

[5] David Shrigley. (2003). Balloon [Digital Photo]. David Shirley. (davidshrigley.com/photographs/)

While a gest can be used to capture the essence of a relationship, mood, attitude, or situation during the moment it's happening, some of the most effective comedy I've seen relies on the viewer's recognition of what is *about* to happen. I have described this elsewhere as ***Here It Comes***.[6] Applied to physical comedy, this is a moment of staging that makes it vividly clear to the audience that something only seconds away is about to impact the clown—perhaps something dangerous or horribly hilarious. The clown is either blithely unaware that their own actions are about to trigger it, or unaware that the arrival of some external force is imminent. Alternatively, the clown may be actively complicit in bringing on a Here it Comes moment. I once saw Canadian mask-maker and physical comedian Gina Bastone in a performance featuring her mischievous little girl clown character Suzy. Suzy was on stage with her playmate, showing off what she'd found in her mother's purse—a cigarette lighter! With a gleam in her eye, she figured out how to flick it to make the fire pop up, then looked around to find something to burn. Suzy spotted the great red velour curtains at the edge of the proscenium, did a take to the audience with her wild impish grin, then popped the flame and walked toward the stage left curtain with the lighter held out in front of her. She stopped before lighting the curtain on fire, but not before she brought on a huge vocal response from the audience. This was a gest of anticipation. Consider what physical action, or sound, or visual clue you can construct that will signal to the audience: Here It Comes!

The primary equation to keep in mind is:

Gist + Gesture = Gest

[6] Will Weigler. (2016). *The Alchemy of Astonishment: Engaging the Power of Theatre*. Victoria Canada: University of Victoria. 88-90.

Framing the Gests

1 Consider the frame as a storyboard showing a progression of gests

In his marvelous and valuable book, *Why is That So Funny? – A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy*, John Wright describes a three-step process for creativity that he learned as a schoolboy from his art teacher. They are:

Make a choice.

Exaggerate it.

Tidy it up. [7]

It starts with coming up with a choice and then launching yourself into explorations of it "on the floor." Once the piece begins to take shape, you then take it further. Wright is quick to clarify that "exaggerate it" does not necessarily mean "make it bigger." In internet-based physical comedy, which can accommodate the viewer's perception of small visual details and nuanced reactions, "exaggerate it" may mean take your impulse further into a distilled, minimally intense action. His final direction to "tidy it up" is an invitation to strip away excess, but here I would add another layer to his teaching. As you are assessing the routine you've created, identify the gests. Look for where in the progression of events in your routine you have intuitively found a physical gestural action, or engagement with a prop or costume, that perfectly embodies the gist of your clown's feeling, relationship, or situation. Are there any moments that embody your clown's mood, desire, attitude, triumph, fear, etc., while simultaneously ***embodying its opposite***? Are there any moments when it is clear that something momentous, dangerous, or embarrassing is just about to happen? As you gain fluency with how gests work, you will be able to refine the gests you have spontaneously generated so that they are more on the mark, so that they more perfectly capture the gist of whatever it is you want to express. This is not the work of simply paring away extraneous material—you are deliberately moving toward crafting the images so that each one will be a delightful and unmistakable gest. Now list them. Name them. Catalogue them. Now look for the gaps between the gests you've gathered. Are there sections in the routine where you are just vamping your way along?

[7] John Wright. (2007) *Why is That so Funny?: A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy*. New York: Limelight Editions, 163-165.

As much as you can, replace generalized actions with choices that are resolutely gests. Once you have gathered all of these gests, consider how you can place them in the frame of the camera's window in the order of your narrative arc as if it were a storyboard or series of comic book panels. It may feel like a constraint on your wild and unfettered clown soul, but working consciously to express your creativity and vivacity within the structure of a series of gestic moments is no different than a poet who finds luminous voice within the 5-7-5 structure of a haiku form, or wits who make the limerick form work for them. Chart your vivid gests so that you move through the progression of them from start to finish and you will find your audience is with you hand in glove during the entire journey.

2 Anchor the opening

In your catalogue of gests that will carry you through the routine, be sure to put special effort into devising the very first one. Craft an opening gest that will clearly establish the clown's initial relationship to the viewer, or establish the premise of the clown's situation and the task they are facing. In the first moment of a routine performed on Zoom by Aurora C. Gooch, her clown is seen opening her eyes as she wakes up next to a note that she (or possibly someone else) has left on her pillow, reminding her to practice piano.

The tick box on the note is left unchecked, showing us that the task has not yet been done. From this initial image, viewers immediately understand the premise of what's about to come. What's more, this image is embedded with an extra punch! How many of us know in our guts what it's like to wake up and be confronted first thing by the emotional weight of the day's dreaded to-do list? Note that her prop is not an extensive, realistic list: it is the entire concept of a to-do list reduced to its quintessential element. This is what gives a gest its power. A good gest condenses the big idea of a feeling, a relationship or a

situation into one, perfectly summed up image. In her delightful routine, Aurora's clown gets up from bed and begins squeezing and poking and rattling various parts of her face, each time producing the sounds of piano practice exercises. When she finishes, she returns to bed and ticks the box on the to-do list.

In the image you present in your opening frame, what clues or cues can you embed in your location, your costume accessories, the objects on hand, or actions you are taking, that will instantly reveal the universe you inhabit and the circumstances you are in?

3 Using music and sound effects as gests

Music and sound effects can play an important supporting role in physical comedy and clown performances. While you are taking full advantage of the focused frame of that small rectangular window, filling it with a series of delightfully crafted gestic images, consider adding audio elements that are also gestic. Composer Kurt Weill, who often collaborated with Brecht, has described how there is a distinction between music that contributes a generalized wash of feelings to a performance, and music that actually serves to embody the relationships, situations and contradictions in tandem with what's happening visually.[8] In the first ***Jaws*** movie, when composer and conductor John Williams scored the moment that the shark begins to advance, he used a simple two-note ***ostinato*** (derived from the Latin word ***obstinate***), with an E-F-E-F bass line played on a tuba. As we all know, it was literally sensational and that riff remains seared in the public imagination to this day. He achieved the impact by adding musical scoring that embodied the feeling and situation of that moment.

In a live performance recorded and then posted online, a group of clowns[9] in a show called ***Laughing Allowed! — The Slapstick World of Neighbourhood Activism***, performed a routine about one of the reasons why people might avoid joining neighbourhood committees. The clowns' routine showed how exasperating it can be when some simple idea is sent out on a group e-mail and then snowballs as others join in the e-mail trail and everyone gets fired up into arguments. The musical underscoring chosen for this comic

[8] Kurt Weill & Erich Albrecht. "'Gestus' in Music." *The Tulane Drama Review*, V. 6, No. 1 (Sep, 1961), 28-32.
[9] Jack Meredith, Judith Scott, Fred Jamin, Stephen Lewis, and Anke van Leeuwen.

routine was Grieg's "Hall of the Mountain King," because the pizzicato use of the strings comically evokes the action of fingers furiously typing on computer keyboards.

(Watch the routine *Email Trails* here: https://vimeo.com/115130460)

For your internet-based performance, avoid generic comedy music tracks and dedicate your efforts to finding or creating musical accompaniments that will similarly embody the moment-to-moment feelings, relationships, contradictions and surprises you are enacting in your clown performance.

This same prompt applies to sound effects. With your viewers all focused on that frame, make the extra effort to identify and include the most perfectly suitable, perfectly timed sound effects that will punctuate (or humorously contradict) the action within it. This can be achieved as simply as having your off-camera confederates equipped with live sound effect instruments at the ready.

Working the Edges

The exits and entrances on a theatre stage of any kind will likely be farther apart than the arm's length of the performer. What an asset we have in the four sides of internet-based physical comedy where the exits and entrances are so very close at hand. This section offers suggestions for how to take advantage of the edges of the frame for comic effect.

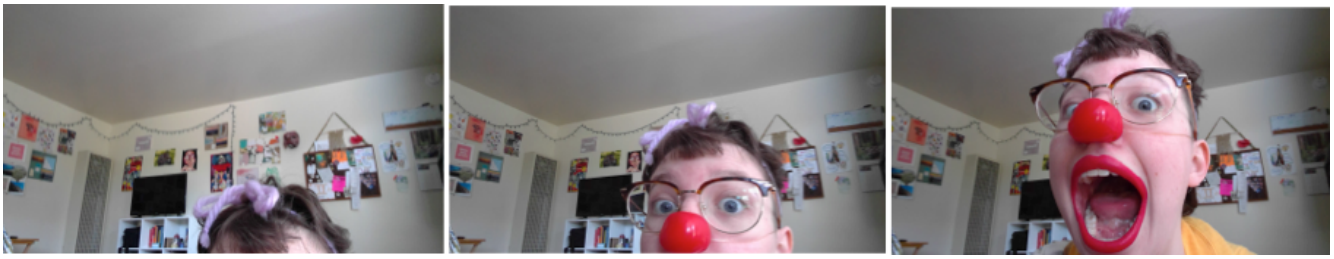
4 Clowns entering and leaving the frame

Every Frame a Painting is an entertaining and informative online series of short videos about film theory created by Tony Zhou.[10] In his episode on visual comedy,[11] he demonstrates the simply achieved comedic potential of people entering and leaving the frame of the movie in funny ways. This includes what he calls "There and back again": going to the edge of the frame, making a discovery, and then returning to the centre having seen or experienced whatever it was the character saw. Entering and leaving the frame does not have to be limited to the left and right edges. How can your clown leave through the bottom of the frame or through the top of it?

For her Zoom performance, Emily-Ann Hopkins found inspiration in the delicious repetitions and rhythms of Dolly Parton's classic ballad "Jolene":

Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene
I'm begging of you please don't take my man
Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene
Please don't take him just because you can [12]

Emily-Ann's clown could simply have sung the song with her bright eyes wide and her broad smile beaming and that would have been funny all by itself. But she chose to bring it up to the next level by working the edge: entering and leaving the frame in a funny way. Crouching in front of the camera so that her head was below the bottom edge of the video, she launched herself up into the frame with just enough of a pause at the top of her rise to be seen singing "Jolene" before dropping down out of sight, and then rising right back up into frame again and again and again for each subsequent "Jolene."



[10] Taylor Ramos and Tony Zhou. (April 2014 to September 2016). *Every Frame a Painting* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjFqcJQXGZ6T6sxyFB-5i6A
[11] Taylor Ramos and Tony Zhou. (2014, May 26) *Edgar Wright - How to Do Visual Comedy* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FOzD4Sfgag
[12] Dolly Parton (1973) Jolene. On *Jolene* [LP], Nashville, TN: RCA Victor. 1973.

Emily-Ann's ingenuity was in finding a comically physical manifestation of the song's repeating line. Bouncing in and out of frame by squatting and rising gave her appearances and her disappearances a gleeful giddy energy that made her clown seem for all the world like a cartoon character, unbounded by the laws of physics.

As you work out the choreography for your routine keep in mind that you also have the potential to leave the frame in funny ways by walking forward past the camera position, or to enter into the frame by starting from behind the camera and brushing past it on your way into view. And, depending on your location, there may be funny ways to make your entrance or exit (or execute a "there and back again") through a location in the distant background of the frame. Again, conceptualize the progression of your routine as playing out visually in a series of imaginative storyboard panels and consider whether some ingenious use of a prop, a window, door, or other supporting device can contribute to the funny way you enter or leave.

5 Objects entering and leaving the frame

In addition to the clown's body moving in and out of the frame in funny ways, Zhou, cribbing from film theorist/historian David Bordwell, notes, "things popping up into frame are funny."[13] When the clown reaches out of frame and pulls a prop back into it, or when something is handed to the clown from off frame, or thrown or shoved to the clown, it can be funny. An object can rise from below or be dropped from above. The key here is to make use of what séance mediums used to call their "confederates." These were the hidden assistants, standing by just out of sight and ready to hand off or receive props, or to provide live sound effects that would support the smooth operation of the main attraction. Line up your confederates so that these objects can seamlessly and hilariously enter and exit the frame of the scene.

Rachel Wansker created a riotously compelling Zoom-based clown routine that was perfectly suited to the medium. She did it by working the edges. Standing centre screen looking earnestly at the viewers, she extended her closed hand forward to the camera and when it was near enough to fill the frame, she opened it to reveal that she was

[13] See Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell. (2007 April 30) Observations on Film Art: Funny Framings [Blog post] Retrieved from http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2007/04/30/funny-framings

holding a ripe strawberry. The close-up view of this perfect fresh berry made it seem especially tantalizing for viewers. She drew her hand back—back all the way to her face—and popped it in her mouth. Like Aurora C. Gooch's routine and her "Practice Piano" note, this opening image anchored the audience's understanding of the premise of Rachel's piece in one succinct gesture: this was going to be a routine about a clown eating food. Rachel's clown, Pickle, then proceeded to take bites of a variety of snacks one at a time. Always maintaining an earnest gaze directly forward to the viewers, she extended her left hand straight out past the edge of the frame and then brought it back, now holding . . . a baguette! Keeping her eyes fixed forward, she took a bite, then extended her hand with the bread out of frame again and drew it back empty. With her other hand she reached into her shirt and pulled out a cellophane package of spaghetti, which she then tucked into her trousers. She reached off screen and pulled back in . . . a saucepan. Reaching back into her trousers, she pulled out a handful of the now-fully cooked spaghetti and dropped it into the saucepan before taking a bite of the pasta from the pot. All this time she had been looking straight at the audience. Disposing of the cookware by extending a hand off screen and bringing it back empty, she then reached her left hand directly above her head and pulled down . . . some broccoli. Turning her gaze away from the audience for the first time, she looked at it, which then allowed her to do a take back to the camera as if to say: *this is not what I want*. She extended her hand holding the broccoli above her head and out of frame, and when she pulled it back down again she was now holding a tub of ice cream. She spooned out a scoop of the ice cream, put it in her mouth, then tilted her head back as a stream of chocolate syrup poured from above her directly into her open mouth. Her routine continued and expanded from there with more hilarity.



Rachel's achievement involved taking full advantage of her nimble confederates off camera as well as all four sides of the frame. By relying on the assets built into the Zoom medium—those nearby edges so much closer to her than the wings of any stage—she created several minutes of pure delight, inviting us into this marvelous clown universe of hers that defied reality as we know it with its bountiful and never-ending supply of food.

6 Use your foreground and background

Among the exciting assets of online physical comedy performance is the potential it offers to take advantage of two independent yet related playing areas framed within in a single window. Viewers can watch what's happening in the foreground while simultaneously seeing what's happening in the background.

In a Zoom-based routine performed in an outdoor field, two clowns: Kotta (Maria Sotiropoulou) and her friend Corina (Liu Ho Man), wanted to compel a reluctant third clown, Gino (Sean Lang) into marrying Kotta. This simple premise took full advantage of the use of foreground and background to convey the physical manifestations of the relationships in the story. After first seeing him playing his concertina in the background, the two female clowns chased Gino (off screen) and then caught up with him, filling the foreground of the screen. They held him captive, one on each side, playfully urging him to say the words "I do" but he resisted their advances. As Kotta threw her arms around him, performer Marie relied on an old vaudeville bit—embracing a coat and hat hung on a coat rack to make it look like a person—but she applied it here with a fresh new angle. When Marie slipped her arm through the downstage sleeve of Gino's coat, Sean was able to drop down unseen below the camera. For just a moment, Kotta revelled in her intimate embrace with Gino until she and Corina (and the viewers) realized the coat was empty. They pulled apart and in the background Gino was seen in his undershirt sneaking away.

The entire scenario played out beautifully because the performers so carefully framed the progression of events through their use of foreground, background, off screen, and the bottom edge of the frame. They used these assets to add dimension to their storytelling, alternately hiding and then revealing to the viewers far more than they might have been able to control had they incorporated these elements live on stage.

Try experimenting with the convention that a clown facing the camera in the foreground is blithely unaware of what's happening behind them while the audience sees it all. Perhaps whatever is going on back there is about to have a significant impact on the foreground clown. Or, perhaps whatever is going on back there is actively undermining what the foreground clown is struggling to achieve. Alternatively, the clown in the background may be the one valiantly pursuing some task, unaware that the clown in the foreground is working at counter-purposes to their efforts. Depending on the space you're in, the background can extend far into the distance and accommodate the background clown's actions while the foreground clown is focused on their own task. Keep in mind that you can play with the moment of revelation as one clown realizes what the other is up to.

7 Withholding

When watching a story play out in a performance online, viewers typically expect that all the visual and auditory information will be presented to them within the borders of the video frame. Temporarily interrupting or partially withholding access to that information can be funny, especially when the narrative is designed to make the viewer really want to see or hear something significant to the story at that moment. Rather than think of this as a mean-spirited teasing of the viewer—like deliberately holding a ball out of their reach—you can set up the appearance of unplanned circumstances that just happen to block the viewer's access to what the clown is up to at a strategically inopportune time. Perhaps, as the viewer's attention is closely focused on the unfolding action, the clown turns to face away from the camera, or a key prop is obscured by what seems to be a random chance, or an unexpected sound overwhelms the clown's words. Keep it playful, with a sense that this sincere clown is utterly oblivious to the viewer's temporary problem—not being able to see or hear a significant element at that vital moment. By adopting this attitude, they will enjoy it much more than if they feel the clown purposefully preventing them from seeing or hearing what is clearly important.

Sigrid Norheim Ørntoft, created a maddeningly wonderful Zoom-based clown routine by relying on withholding (in this case obscuring) sound. Performed in her kitchen at home, her clown, Shiny, had laid out on the table a collection of sparkly and glittery items next to a blender. Shiny presented herself in the mode of someone offering a YouTube inspirational/instruction video. As with Aurora and Rachel, the visual setup of this opening image instantly established for the viewers the premise of the routine about to unfold. In the opening moments, we learned from Shiny that she had "made a discovery that can save the world." It involved combining the special items she prepared and blending them in pure water to create a healing elixir, and she was prepared to share with the viewers her world-saving creation. With charm and a determined sense of urgency, she carefully talked us through the steps of her recipe. Unfortunately, all through her instructional process, she continually pressed the blender button at the most perfectly inopportune times—just as she was at the cusp of explaining important details or warnings. So, although we could see that her lips were moving, the sound of the blender completely obliterated what she was saying again and again. This was essentially the entire routine, and it completely succeeded. Within Shiny's whimsically absurd universe, the stakes were convincingly high. Orchestrating it so that crucial information appeared to be inadvertently blocked made the routine hilariously exasperating.

A variation on comically withholding full visual or auditory access involves leading the viewer initially to think they are seeing one thing, and then revealing that what's actually happening is something else altogether. Chaplin used this device in his films: turning his back to the camera so that his movement looked like he was being seasick on a ship before he turned to reveal he was reeling in a fish, or appearing from behind to be sobbing at the prospect of his wife leaving him for being an alcoholic, before he turned to

the camera and revealed he had been shaking a cocktail mixer the whole time.[14] Another film example of partial withholding leading to a reveal can be seen in the 1984 comedy *Top Secret*.[15] When Val Kilmer's character is crawling along in the grass behind enemy lines he unexpectedly crawls right up to the boots of a German soldier. In this case, it's a camera pan up that reveals the boots are just a pair of boots left in the field, but the concept of a partially seen prop that appears to be one thing and is then fully revealed to be something else can be easily accomplished by taking advantage of the edges of the viewing frame.

Val Kilmer in *Top Secret* (1984)

Cultivating a Relationship with the Viewers

To understand one of the unique benefits of performing physical comedy online, consider that living in the COVID era has ushered in an easy familiarity with platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and others. The idea that many of us will spend time each day looking into a screen to meet with our friends, family, and colleagues, seems perfectly ordinary to us now. We have become accustomed to feeling in relationship with the person on the other end of the screen. Clowns can effectively leverage this new reality by tapping into the level of comfort viewers may have with accepting the naturalness of experiencing a human connection with the performer(s) on their computer.

[14] John Jasper and Charles Chaplin (Producers), & Charles Chaplin (Director) (1917). *The Immigrant* [Motion Picture]. USA: Mutual Film Corporation; Charles Chaplin (Producer/Director) (1921). *The Idle Class* [Motion Picture]. USA: First National. See Chaplin's "withholding" clip from *The Idle Class* here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOrTnH2rKWA

[15] Jon Davison and Hunt Lowry (Producers), & Jim Abrahams, David Zucker & Jerry Zucker (Directors) (1984). *Top Secret!*. United States: Paramount Pictures.

8 Work the small scale

Physical comedy on the video screen offers all sorts of opportunities for incorporating subtle facial expressions and small object work. Take advantage of it! If a clown is trying to achieve some impossible task, and the visual gag relies on an object that is mis-matched to the challenge because it is too small or too large, a crisp close-up view of this too-tiny or too-hefty object can dial up the comedy of the bit.

In a multi-frame Zoom routine, a Foreman clown was delegating jobs to all the clowns on the maintenance team. Cuong Kim Nguyen's clown Kimo was seen in her frame casually cleaning her ear with a Q-Tip as she waited for her assignment. She was instructed to clean the client's car, and she enthusiastically accepted the task. The next time we saw her, she was hard at work, carefully cleaning the car with her Q-tip! The absurdity of her earnest endeavour came across with extra punch because we could clearly see that teensy cotton up against the enormous surfaces of the car.

Along with inviting visual access to simple comic juxtaposition, there is potential to heighten the viewer's compassion for the clown when, through the screen, there is an intimate virtual proximity between them. In other writings, I have described several theatrical staging strategies that I call ***Over to You***.[16] They involve setting up a moment in performance that will lead the audience to have a direct personal response to what's happening on stage rather than just observing from a distance. Some of these staging strategies are based on the human capacity to imaginatively "co-experience" the physical sensations of what a performer is going through. For example, the American TV program *Fear Factor* tapped into viewers' virtual "co-experienced" empathy with the show's contestants as they sat at home watching these people chewing and swallowing big insects to win prizes.

When Ingrid Hansen adapted her one-woman stage production ***Epidermis Circus*** [17] to a Zoom-based performance, it was a relatively easy transition, since she had already incorporated video as a significant element in the staging. The show presented a series of circus acts featuring parts of her body as the different performers. In her pre-COVID onstage version of the show, a live-feed video camera relayed her small actions to a large

[16] Will Weigler. (2016). *The Alchemy of Astonishment: Engaging the Power of Theatre*. Victoria, Canada: University of Victoria. 131-172.

[17] *Epidermis Circus* was produced by SNAFU Society of Unexpected Spectacles, performed by Ingrid Hansen with comedic and directorial input by Kathleen Greenfield and Britt Small, and puppet ballet coaching by Rod Peter Jr.

projected image on a screen above her head. Her fingers performed a scene from a Shakespeare-esque tragedy; one of her partially covered breasts (with a face drawn on with a marker pen) was stand-up comedian Larry the Boob; and one of her butt cheeks, with a talking mouth made from her thumb and forefinger, was little Baby Butt.

The routine involved an off-screen, smooth talking saleswoman (also voiced by Ingrid) pressuring Baby Butt to have Botox injections. Baby Butt tried to resist but Saleswoman was persistent. Finally, Baby Butt gave in and agreed to it. In an extraordinary application of small found object work, the "hypodermic needle" that came in from the edge of the screen was actually a mechanical pencil.

If Ingrid had used a real needle, it would have been deeply distressing to see it pressing against and maybe puncturing her skin. But the mechanical pencil's graphite enabled her to raise the stakes of viewers' concern for Baby Butt while still remaining in the world of comedy. Ingrid reports that even in the live on-stage performance, the "injections" seen magnified on the big overhead screen always triggered vocal reactions from her audiences.

This is the potential power in performance online when viewers are invited to "co-experience" something with the clown by seeing it so closely through the video screen. Setting aside clichéd routines like sniffing and reacting to a stinky shoe, imagine how you might integrate gags that take advantage of what appear to be the clown's authentic encounters with real world, sense-based experiences. When seen close-up in the frame of that computer screen, what might the clown taste, swallow, smell, feel, hear, or see that genuinely seems to affect them? Let the power of your audience's human empathy raise the stakes of their kinship with the clown.

9 Alliance

A *take* is one of the most basic moves in physical comedy. When you think about what it represents, a take is a truly delightful concept. It is designed to invite collusion and a sense of implied connection between the performer and the spectators. The clown sees something, registers its significance, then turns and looks to the audience as if to say, *Did you just see that, too?*

On stage, a take is performed in the general direction of the audience, but online, the virtual feeling of proximity to the clown's take directly to the camera has the potential to be received by the viewer as a very personal invitation to share an alliance. When Sigrid Norheim Ørntoft, as her clown Shiny, spoke through the camera to her viewers, she was treating us as if we were her confidants. For the finale of Ingrid Hansen's ***Epidermis Circus***, she performed a high dive into water. Having filled a shallow baking tray on her table with a half an inch of water, she "dove" in slow motion, with a close up of her head facing sideways, from above the screen edge all the way down to the tray, landing with a subdued splash into the water. As she lay there in the water, she began to recall a personal memory directly to the viewers. The unusual twist was that this didn't feel like a standard-issue speech. Lying in the shallow pan of water with her face sideways as she

spoke, it felt like a gest of a person lying next to you in bed sharing an intimate story. She drew on the power of that personal connection across the video screen that we have grown accustomed to experiencing during the pandemic and the impact she made was profound.

In the heyday of radio dramas, a narrator speaking in hushed conspiratorial tones to the microphone did not have any kind of actual connection to the listeners, but the actor carried an attitude of having that intimate confidant-like relationship. That attitude, in turn, could be felt by each person hearing the broadcast. Whether you are working live while seeing a grid of people's faces on a monitor, or just seeing the camera lens—or even if you are recording a performance for subsequent showings—endeavour to adopt that attitude of connection. When you talk directly and with a degree of sincere vulnerability and openness to your confidant, each spectator will feel encouraged to accept that you have a relationship with them.

Playing on the Zeitgeist

Throughout history, clowns have found inventive ways to approach the stories of our personal troubles and collective social challenges, and then reconfigure them into enchantment, into mirth, and into a begrudging acknowledgment of all that it means to be human. It is no exaggeration to say that we are living in extraordinary times; two decades into the 20th century, clowns have a deep well from which to draw rich source material for comedy. Along with devising laugh-inducing themes that align with the salient elements of our off-kilter world, you can also orchestrate the very structure of your routines to resonate with our zeitgeist.

In a recent interview, Simon McBurney, the Artistic Director of one of the world's premier physical theatre companies, Complicité, named what he felt is the essential nature of a theatre performance. He described it as an entire room full of people who are all experiencing the same thing at the same time. He then went on to observe that here in the midst of our global pandemic, we are in the unique position of being part an entire planet of people all experiencing the same thing at the same time.[18] Consider that through virtual mosaic choirs and "throw-to" choreography, through gridded online gatherings, and ongoing physical isolation that has led many of us to contact long lost friends, we are witness to a palpable and unprecedented level of awareness of the human networks that connect around the world. Here are some possibilities for embodying our growing mindfulness about this felt sense of simultaneity across geography and diversity into the structure of a physical comedy routine.

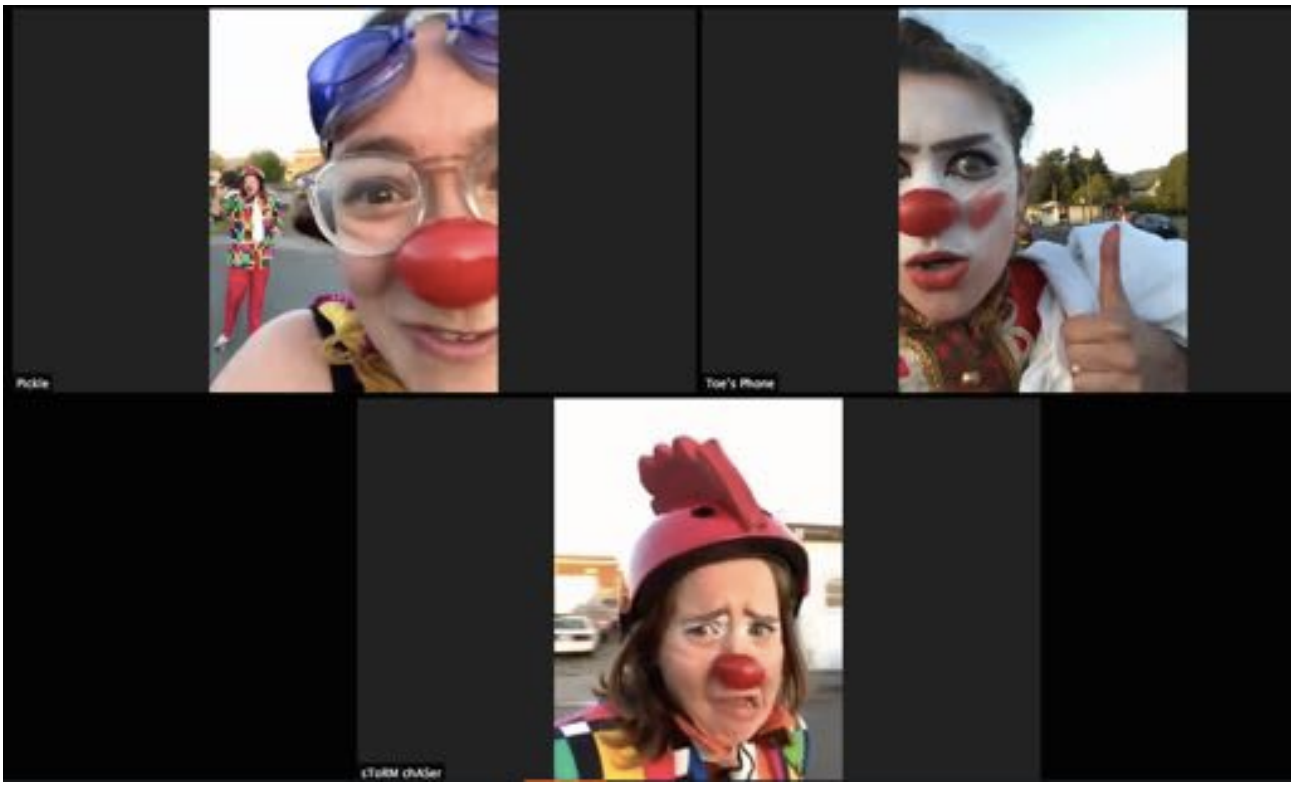
10 Visual Polyphony

Opera enthusiasts will be familiar with Mozart's compelling quintet in the first act of ***Così fan tutte*** when the contrasting perspectives of five different individuals all add the threads of their single thoughts to the whole tapestry. It is aurally complex and thrilling to hear. Unfortunately, as choir directors and their group members have learned, Zoom and other similar platforms are not technically equipped to accommodate multiple overlapping

[18] Simon McBurney. (2020, May 20) *The Encounter Q&A | Complicité* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa3SMSRe8-g

voices. The gorgeous mosaic-style choirs we've been seeing on YouTube performances are achieved through a great deal of planning and expensive post-production studio editing. However, by relying on the visual punch of physical comedy, it is comparatively straightforward to set up an internet-based performance in which viewers can simultaneously see multiple clowns on the screen, each performing in their own frames.

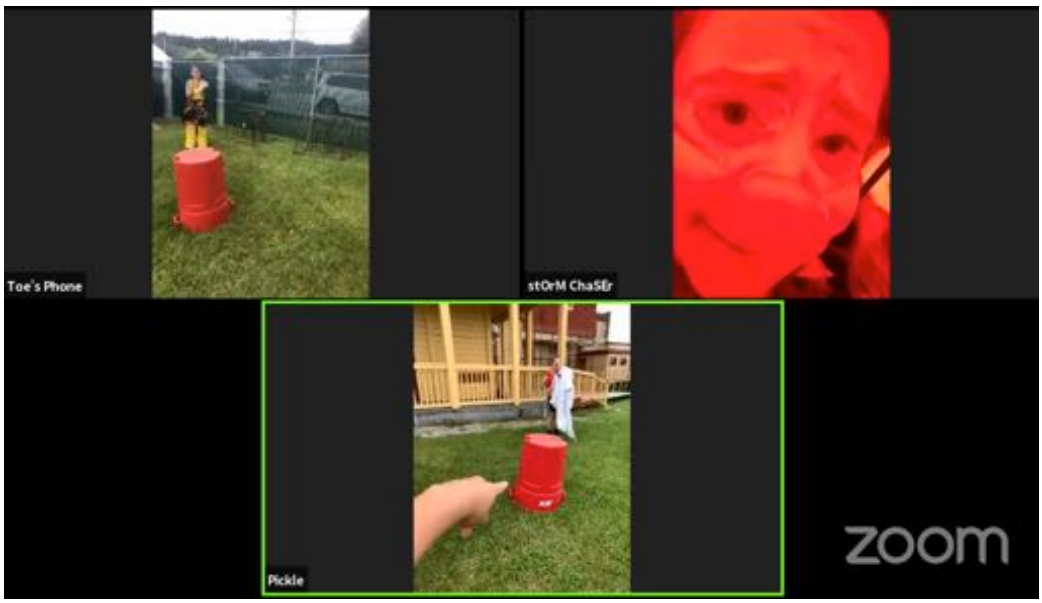
The concept of multiple individual perspectives revealed simultaneously in a clown routine was vividly brought to life in a Zoom performance featuring Toe (Claire Aldridge), Pickle (Rachel Wansker), and sTOrM ChASer (Kit Solowy). The technology was simple. Standing relatively close to each other, the performers all held their own video camera phones in "seflie" mode so that viewers could see both the clowns' faces and the other clowns in the background over their shoulders. The premise of the routine was that Pickle announced they were all going to capture a monster. Toe and sTOrM ChASer listened carefully as Pickle described just what the monster looked like, and it quickly became apparent that the monster was actually sTOrM ChASer. Suddenly one of the pursuers became the prey, and the wild chase was on.



As they ran through fields and streets and backyards, the viewers witnessed three very different experiences of the same event, unfolding together on one screen. This is where we see the potential for illuminating the zeitgeist through the structure of comedy routines. Is there something funny to be found in the nature of our sometimes divergent, sometimes unified, responses to the upheaval in the world right now? How might the model demonstrated by Claire, Rachel and Kit be used to showcase awareness of the multiplicity of experiences that we are now facing?

On a side note, in the Monster routine, sTOrM ChASer found refuge under a red plastic inverted garbage can. The view shifted to a single frame and from this hiding place sTOrM ChASer continued talking to the audience in hushed tones, very much in the spirit of alliance as described in the previous section.

The view then reverted to all three cameras and revealed that the hiding place was not so secure after all: the other two were creeping up on the bucket to capture the monster.



Ready with a net, they knocked over the can revealing in a great comic surprise for them and the viewers that the monster was not under it. After a moment of bewilderment, sTOrM ChASer leapt into the frame to attack them.

11 Throwing to . . .

The "throw to" is an increasingly popular device that is perfectly suited to internet-based performance in the COVID era because it enables performers who are isolated in different geographical locations to appear interconnected across time and space. A performer in one frame throws an object off screen to another performer in another frame who catches it (either a matching object or something like it). Alternatively, one performer ends their piece of the routine with a final physical action and when the frame shifts to the next performer, that person starts their piece of the routine with the same physical action. Both of these "throw to" devices are variations on well-known theatre games in which performers pass an object to one another, which becomes "transformed" into a different object with each pass, or they stop a scene mid-way through by shouting ***freeze***, "tagging out" one of the performers, assuming their final physical position, and then carrying on with a new scene and a new meaning. Consider what potential there is for a "throw-to" in the online/digital world. Is there some variation online that cannot be done as effectively (or as elegantly) live on stage?

Leif Gantvoort created a physical comedy twist on the popular TikTok Makeup Brush Challenge, which relies on an online-based "throw to" concept.[19] The premise of these Makeup Brush challenge videos is that women wearing casual clothes and no makeup will face the camera, take a "magic" powder brush and reach forward with it until the bristles block the entire screen. When they pull it back they are transformed, now with full makeup and stylish clothes. They will then drop or toss the brush off camera where it is caught by another woman on another screen wearing no makeup and in casual clothes who tries it for herself, and then passes the magic brush along to the next woman. There have been variations with women and young girls transforming themselves into wearing regalia from their cultural traditions, etc. Leif's version starts in the same mode, but when the magic brush is dropped into a man's lap, he is obsessed with solving the mystery

[19] Leif Gantvoort (2002) *Passed the Brush*. Retrieved from www.youtube.com/channel/UCXf_4nyctXdknDkqS3dNfnA

of its origins, its meaning, and ultimately he becomes distraught by his inability to make sense of why the universe has sent this object to him.

Watch the video *Passed the Brush* here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbBaM0Fl0Vs

It is a playful video, juxtaposing assumptions about gender through comedy, and is a sweet example of the potential for building this device into the devising of a routine. How might you use an online "throw to" to comically illuminate the multiplicity of our experiences as we each find our unique ways of coping, with or flourishing in response to, the global challenges we are all facing?

12 Drawing on the zeitgeist for your comedy theme

As a theatre director, I often incorporate physical comedy into the staging of my work. The comedic situations I rely on typically take one of two forms. Either the character is making an effort to achieve some task and is thwarted/ bewildered by the object or situation they are trying to manage, or the character fails to fully account for the consequences of their choices and so the results of their actions wind up exploding into a situation that's worse for them. Given our zeitgeist of having to navigate a global pandemic, ecological crises and outrage at increasing levels of violence and oppression, consider how you might choose to anchor the theme of your physical comedy routine into one of these two forms.

What might the "clown version" of what is happening right now look like in terms of being thwarted/ bewildered by encounters with this current reality, or in terms of the comic impact of failing to account for the consequences of our actions? Clowns are at heart resilient creatures in their inventiveness and pluck. They are sometimes the recipients of unexpected twists of good fortune. How might these basic clown characteristics help to shine a little light on how all of us could possibly survive our own future? Relying on physical comedy to put a name to the specific nature of life-threatening situations, as well as putting a name to the sources of our resilience and the power of unity and collective resistance, will ultimately make your clown work vital to audiences everywhere.

It will be funny because it's true.

About Will Weigler

I am a theatre director, playwright, producer and professional storyteller. Based in Victoria, British Columbia, I have travelled around the globe teaching and learning. Much of my work involves collaborating with people in communities to co-create original performances about the issues that matter in their lives. In some projects, participants have a direct hand in writing and staging their scripts and then performing the work themselves. For other projects, I take on more responsibility as playwright, interviewing community members, writing scenes and songs based on what I learn, and then sharing my drafts of the scenes and lyrics with them until they feel the play best represents their experience. I also work as a theatre coach and consultant, helping solo performers shape and refine their own material to create a show.

I earned a PhD in Applied Theatre at the University of Victoria, Canada, and attended the National Theatre Institute and Oberlin College, both in the US. I have also written several books on theatre, including:

The Alchemy of Astonishment: Engaging the Power of Theatre (University of Victoria, 2016)

Strategies for Playbuilding: Helping Groups Translate Issues into Theatre (Heinemann, 2001)

From the Heart - How 100 Canadians Created an Unconventional Theatre Performance about Reconciliation (VIDEA, 2015)

Laughing Allowed: A How-to Guide for Making a Physical Comedy Show to Build Neighbourhood Resilience [co-author] (Building Resilient Neighbourhoods, 2016)

Web of Performance: An Ensemble Workbook [co-editor/co-author]
(University of Victoria, 2018)

plus, a personal, self-published open-source memoir:
A Touch of The Cancer: Unexpected Gifts from an Unplanned Journey, (Victoria, BC, 2018)

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