



photo: Jack Foley

## Letter to Beginner Clown

Sometimes I'll get an email from a beginner clown asking for

advice. I compiled my replies into this letter. I hope this is helpful for you.

My advice would be to contact as many local clowns as you can find, research the history of clowning, especially in terms of where it's heading, and see as many clown performances as you can. My original expertise is in magic, and when I was starting out I would watch the worst magicians I could find, figure out what they were doing wrong, then NOT do what they were doing. The most useful piece of advice I can think of, however, is to get whatever theater training you can, and as much of it as possible. Never forget that clowning is theater and performance... the costuming & make-up are just tools to help you portray that character.

My personal feeling about clowning is to avoid the American clown makeup look... it's like performing while hiding behind a mask. My clown character wears no make-up, just a red nose and simple colorful clothing (brightly colored shirt, big baggy pants, suspenders, vest, big shoes, and a soft top hat.) Learn body awareness, with such training as mime, dance, expressions, comedia del arte. Study Avner the Eccentric, Charlie Chaplin, Marcel Marceau, Red Skelton, Ed Wynn, Dick Van Dyke, Rowan Atkinson, and other clown/comedic greats.

Watch a Charlie Chaplin silent movie, find a gag sequence that really strikes you as funny, then replay it over & over, in slow motion, fast motion, a frame at a time... analyze why it's funny. Make a list of other options he could have chosen for each movement & expression, then figure out why he chose the one he did. Analyze the underlying theme of that gag, the emotions behind every move, what motivated the tramp character to do what he did & when.

**Sample page from "Kids Think It's Funny", available at  
[www.MisterGreggy.com/shopping/#Books](http://www.MisterGreggy.com/shopping/#Books)**

Write a synopsis about your findings, then incorporate that same analysis to your own routines. Videotape one of your shows or routines, then watch it and "tear it apart." Be brutally honest. It's OK to be bad... it's just from inexperience. If your so busy telling yourself that your good when your not, then you'll never make the effort to improve because you won't think you need to... and EVERYBODY can always improve somewhere. It's OK to acknowledge that something you do or have done is good, just be aware that there is always room for growth and improvement.

I've been performing for over 30 years, yet I still look for ways to improve. Recently, for instance, I did a show for a group of Mexican-Americans. Three people in the group spoke English, 30 or so did not. Afterwards, I realized that I really needed to improve on my ability to entertain without using words... something I've been wanting to do for quite some time, and this experience taught me

some ways I could incorporate mime techniques into my show. Every performance is a lesson!

I have seen MANY clowns fall into the trap of becoming "fashion show clowns." They are easy to spot... they look immaculate, every thread & button in place. Their make-up is perfect, and they can pose for a photo like a statue. They talk a lot about who makes the best costumes & accessories, which make-up works well. Put them on a stage, however, with a room full of children, and they are about as entertaining as a turnip. A brightly dressed turnip, but still a turnip. Look at your self objectively sometimes while your clown career is progressing, to make sure you haven't fallen into that trap.

Here are some web sites about clowning that may help you get started. I wish you the best of luck, and I look forward to hearing about your progress!

Clowns of America: [www.clown.org](http://www.clown.org)  
Cirque de Soleil: [www.cirquedusoleil.com](http://www.cirquedusoleil.com)  
Me: [www.wizardofodd.org](http://www.wizardofodd.org)  
My Agent: [www.magicmanentertainment.com](http://www.magicmanentertainment.com)  
Circus Camp: [www.circuscamp.org](http://www.circuscamp.org)