

The Fine Art of Elevator Clowning -- Shobi Dobi

The door opens for 30 seconds onto the waiting room of the hospice floor. Do you just stand in the back corner of the elevator minding your own business? Not this clown! What an opportunity! At the Clown School of San Francisco (Arina Isaccson's) where I am part of an Improvisation Clown Ensemble (directed by Christina Lewis) we practice "picture freezes." We spend a lot of time being aware of what our expressive bodies look like at any given moment. Christina will call out "Freeze" and the whole group will immediately freeze into a picture. It only takes a second to pose. The trick is to have your character and energy in it -- express an emotion. The door could catch you in a surprised look or sad, happy, scared, timid, embarrassed. Think of it. You are a tired staff member. The elevator door opens and a colorful clown strikes a pose "Hi!" or "Oops" (No words are really necessary) The door closes. It works! "Did you see that?" "Made my day!" Direct, complete and immediate communication. If people get on or off, you can play with them in character.

The elevator lobby of the surgery floor is a place I find myself clowning a lot -- with both patients and staff. It's an excellent place to ease tension by checking their hearts with my musical stethoscope, pulling a mouth coil out of my mouth and begging a surgeon for help, or making balloon flowers. An elevator door opens - I freeze for a few seconds, then say, "Howdy folks!" Everyone on the elevator smiles. The doors close! Sweet and simple.

Checking the hearts of the elevator riders is my favorite pastime. The serious looking doctor in the corner usually has a heart that snores. I've never had anyone get upset, angry or irritated. Comments are usually, "Best elevator ride I ever had!" "How can I get a job like yours?" or, "I bet the kids love you!" My answer to that last one is usually, "Aren't you all kids? Isn't this the Pediatric Elevator?" When I get going, I always end up missing my floor and riding the elevator for a few minutes.

Sometime Birdie Bird, my puppet, will play his little Boom-Box. It has sort of a Rap Beat. (I work in Oakland -- the land of Rap and Hip Hop) I tell people that Birdie is a Rapping Bird. He then proceeds to rap his beak on the wall of the elevator or on my head. Silly, but it works!

From *Apple Dumpling* Carole Johnson of Lynnwood, WA

"I was on the elevator, it stopped, the door opened, and a doctor got on. He took a look at me, and then with a very straight face said, 'Don't tell me, you are here for a nose job.'"

From Muriel Stone "*Hayou*" of Long Beach California

"My husband was in the hospital last year and one morning, when I was feeling down in the dumps, I took my rubber chicken and painted red spots all over him, just because I felt like it!"

"Well, as luck would have it, the only other occupant of the elevator was a young doctor. So I pulled my rubber chicken out of my bag and in a very injured tone said, 'Why wouldn't they take him in the contagious ward? It's obvious that he has chicken pox.' The doctor let out a wild whoop of laughter. After he left the elevator, I could hear him laughing all down the corridor. I wasn't even dressed as a clown. He must have wondered who the wacky old lady was -- but I loved it." (And so did he.)