

# A Love Bomb for Afghanistan



## *A Patchwork for Peace*

This clown mission was conceived in Rome by documentary film-maker Stefano Moser and Sarina Roveta. They convinced the City of Rome to fund the trip, and persuaded a host of organizations to donate 10 tons of medical supplies, school equipment, clothing and food which the clowns distributed. Twenty-one clowns from Italy, Netherlands, Australia, Japan, USA, and South Africa went on the mission

*Gerald Tooth, an Australian Broadcasting Corp. Background Briefing* reporter is pictured above behind the left side of Patch. (Patch is the one wearing the duck on his head!) The pictures and quotes in italics are from Background Briefing report by Gerald Tooth. For laughter, music, and street sounds of Kabul go to their website: [www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing). Hospital Clown Newsletter was given a one time permission to print these.

## *Love Strategy*

Patch Adams came for the first three days to open doors with his fame and reputation of compassionate humor. . . and the doors did open.

Patch Adams: “. . . *I understand for 6,000 years that violence has been a response to violence– that's when people have acted violently, and the people who received it act back violently -- the revenge/fear strategy. I've been asking my audiences since 9/11 what would a love strategy be for a violent act. If the Pentagon had a love room, also a war room, maybe some generals would be tired of the war strategy and think of what a love strategy is. So I'm partly here to further my understanding of dropping love on a country instead of dropping bombs.*”

“*It is a clown's and a doctor's job to walk towards suffering, where most citizens walk away from suffering. I want to be near people who are sick or dying. I want to be in a country torn by war for 20 years. . . Often Aid people think in terms of bringing food and shelter and sanitation and medicine, but they don't often think that what they're [about] is bringing life, and breath back into a war-torn area.*”



Italian Sarina Royeta with an Afghan boy

## ... You have given us our laughter back!

Jean-Paul Bell is a clown from Australia (pictured clowning at the left) He directs the Humor Foundation which supports clowns in Australian hospitals.

*Jean-Paul Bell: Today was a fantastic day because I went off with a group of four or five people to a school, and it was a very controlled environment, but highly intense, because it was full of about 250 girls. That girl power was just so strong that it lifted me to great heights, and they demanded more, and boy, were they taking the opportunity to really express themselves. It was absolutely fantastic, and the Principal of the school, she grabbed me by the hand at the end, a woman, you know, grabbed me by the hand and said, 'This is exactly what they need, they need happiness and you've given it to them'.*

*"...when you talk to the people, or the translators, they just are absolutely overjoyed... one particular thing that just brought tears to my eyes... somebody had said that it reminds them of what it was like 30 years ago, that they laughed, they laughed like they did 30 years ago... it just is too much that these people have been treated like that, for the clown to be able to lift that veil, which is really our job... people come in, they bomb, they shoot and now an uneasy peace is created, and now we come in and people say, 'We now have a form of peace, but you have given us our laughter back.' That is the greatest gift that I possibly could be able to give in my entire performing life. It just makes me feel so valued."*



The reaction to the clowns at the girls school.

## The people were so incredibly hungry on a soul level for this kind of attention!

In the wards, children are crowded two and three in a bed in airless rooms. In a corner of the respiratory diseases ward, Italian clown Ginevra Sanguigno, sits at a bedside next to a mother in a black burqa and begins to comfort the woman's three-year-old son. Can you see the smile in the Afghan mother's eyes.



Afghanistan's major pediatric hospital is Indira Ghandi Hospital, built with funds from the Indian government.

Holly Adams (from Amsterdam) shares her experience of that day with Shobi on the phone.

“At the entrance of the hospital we were mobbed. It was literally a crush. Hundreds of people filling up hallways from end to end. But we didn't expect it. You'd think so intellectually, but when you are in a hospital and the people from the town invade the space it was quite a reality.

“That happened the first day. After that the hospital locked the gates and had men at the entrance to the hallways. Their job was to shove people out the doors and hold them shut. Some of them were made of glass and you'd see faces pressed against the glass all the way up the doors peering in at us. That's with the gates of the hospital locked. People got in over the fences and walls. The people were so incredibly hungry on a soul level for this kind of attention.”

“Whenever we were in a hospital or something I ran away from the camera because there was a crowd around the camera, so I escaped. I got to go into rooms in the hospitals because I escaped. I literally hid, ran, and turned up random staircases and random hallways until I was completely sure I had ditched the mob.”

Holly described what for her was a profound experience for Gerald Tooth.

*“I went into this room and it's filled with beds and every bed has two children, and a variety of ages and states of consciousness, and definitely the states of consciousness had as much to do with starvation as they had to do with disease, perhaps more so. Mothers were everywhere, and it was very silent . . . so I brought a puppet and I had her look in the door first, and I had her . . . sneak in and start to sing, and then I poked my big red nose in. At the beginning, air was heavy, very thick, and then little by little I worked with one child at a time . . . I started with really soft, gentle clowning, more just trying to make the connection and find some common joy, finding some love to share. . . the puppet is singing and reaching out and touching the children, and I'm talking like a two year old, and their eyes. . . they're like glazed over . . . and they reach out . . . to touch this puppet. Because the puppet is singing to them. “ . . . dites á moi” ( in French).*

*“And then they started to giggle . . . I had the opportunity to do some silly clowning, you know, really silly clowning, in addition to the singing, as I made my way around the room. . . I kept making it gently clear that I was just going to do one person at a time, and they all accepted that. It was great. It was absolutely phenomenal!”*

Some clowns did get to go into the wards because Jean-Paul Bell quickly enlists a couple of other clowns to help him entice the crowd of about 400 outside and put on a mime performance.

Jean-Paul Bell: *"And it was quite a fabulous little performance, because we were quite rude. One of the clowns had this red highlight, [D'Lite Thumb Tip] It's a red light that you can throw from one hand to the other, it disappears, and he threw it down my throat and brought it out my bum, and this was absolutely hilarious, the women laughed really loud and then we reversed the process, we pretended to put it in my bum and come out my mouth, and they laughed and laughed, and this was just wonderful to see. You know, they had tears running down their face with this complete, crude clowning, which always works, no matter what culture you're in."*

When Gerald Tooth asked him, *"Isn't there a concern that you might be crossing some boundary of decorum there?"*

Jean-Paul Bell answered *"Well there always is, but the clowns almost have diplomatic immunity from cultural taboos, because I guess we're the ones who can step over that line, and we must be brave, we must take that risk. Clowns are, in a sense, anarchic, but they also have to be sensitive as to where they create anarchy and chaos. We already have enough chaos in Kabul, we don't need any extra chaos."*

The clowns also expressed some uncomfortable feelings. Danny Kollaja "Lanky" told me on the phone that he was spared a lot of discomfort because his glasses were stolen the second day he was there. He could not see much of the detail of the devastation. In other words he could see the wall, but not the writing on the wall. He felt it a blessing because it gave him a sort of distance to the discomfort of the war torn city.

Ginevra Sanguigno has been on many missions with Patch Adams. She says this mission in Afghanistan feels like no other.

*"I feel the death in the air. I feel it around in the street when I walk. I feel the death. This feeling is very strong, and when I first meet the children and they were like afraid, like a wild animal, and I feel the sufferings when I hug the women, I feel the sufferings behind these women so much, so deeply, and this, I get so much emotion."*

On the first day the clowns experience the crush of a crowd and had a few uncomfortable experiences.

Gerald Tooth: *South African Joy Karkeek relives the experience. [the crush of the crowd of the first day]*

*"It was interesting, and on reflection I think I can see exactly what happened. I was expecting this sort of thing, but my first response to everyone was total openness, because I walked out and I just saw this unbelievably friendly faces and smiling people, and a very beautifully faced man came and spoke to me in English, very graciously, asked me where I was from, what the group was doing, and when I explained he just said, 'Thank you so much, that you can come and bring happiness to us because this is what we need.'*

*"And after that, I had a little jar of bubbles which in retrospect was a very stupid thing to do, because what I was doing was, I was blowing the bubbles to try and make a contact with them in some way, to try and do something other than give them something, because that's not always a good idea. I think it was quite a*

*provocative thing to do for those kind of men. Our westernized men it would not be at all like that, but for these men, who put their women in burqas, to see a woman's face, a blue-eyed woman's face pursing her lips and showing how to blow bubbles slowly, it was the most stupid thing I probably could have done."*

Jean-Paul Bell also had thoughts on the culture and their situation.

*"You can definitely see a lot of poverty. And Patch Adams has just been in one of the hospitals, and he got to see Intensive Care, and these people are really dying of nothing more than starvation, and we were just discussing how on earth can we possibly help anybody from a clowning level if they're starving. Before you have circus, you must have bread; 'bread and circus' you've got to have bread. These people don't even have the food. So I don't think there's much we can do for them, plus there's the problem that me being male, the children are mainly being attended by their mothers, we can't go near them really, so if anything does happen in the more serious parts of the hospital, it will be the women clowns that will go in there."*



*South African Joy Karkeek connecting with an Afghan Woman*

One day a visit to an emergency hospital had to be postponed because of an explosion in a school. One boy was injured and 24 seriously hurt. One of the schoolboys came into the crowded schoolroom carrying a small yellow, round, metallic object, which then exploded. It was, by the boy's description, an anti-personnel bomblet from an American cluster bomb. These bombs which are designed so that some of their explosive components don't detonate when they're dropped, but instead, lie around like land mines. Medicins San Frontier (Doctors without Borders) reports that US food packages and cluster bombs were dropped in the same areas. Although different in shape and size, both are yellow in colour and many children pick up the bomblets thinking they contain food. (This was not reported in US news.)

Because of the mine situation there is in Kabul a **Rehabilitation Hospital which is run by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the ICRC**

All the mine victims that have lost legs or arms, or they need some physical rehabilitation, they come to us when they have left the hospitals. The number of people coming every day is huge, up to

300, 400 people coming every day for a different reason. It can be for a new prosthesis, just for physiotherapy, or for a corset, a splint, we have really thousands and thousands of mine victims. So far we have registered almost 30,000. That's 30,000 amputees.

Not all the mine victims lose a leg or an arm, so then you have maybe 150,000, 200,000 people who have been so far injured by mines. This figure doesn't count those who have been killed . . . mines are there, waiting, and they will be there for a long time. We decided a long time ago on a positive discrimination; all the workers here in the hospital, we have 150 workers, 128 so far are themselves disabled, because we want to show that they can work, they can be a normal person like everyone else. This gentleman that is coming now, a physiotherapist, is an amputee. All the people with white coats, all these people that you see passing now, they're disabled, this is the only way to show everybody that life is not finished, you have to go on.

***Mine School***

The problem of mines is so wide spread that schools are run by various organizations that come into Afghanistan especially for this purpose. The clowns participated in the school's mine awareness program (that's mine, not mime!). They take models of the score of different types of mines to be found in Afghanistan and build a mock minefield. In their joking fashion, the clowns show what not to do, by walking through it and pretending to be blown up. This time, the children don't laugh.

***Boys Orphanage***

The clowns found that most situations demanded a performance. In the evening at the "Clown House" they worked out routines At a State-run orphanage in Northern Kabul (the Afghans define an orphan as a child who has lost their father) 400 boys lined up outside to greet the clowns. They did their first comedy routine - they begin with a parody of a military parade. [Pictured below]



*Glauco from Italy with boys from the Orphanage*

Enrico Kerrido from Italy is the Clown Drill Instructor



One of the orphan boys in the crowd is 12-year-old Sola, who says the clowns remind him of his new freedom since the end of Taliban rule. *"I feel very happy because under the Taliban we were forced to do nothing, just as we were in prison, and now we finally feel that we are free."*

The Director of the orphanage, Mohammad Zaher Akbary says the clown visit is a great psychological boost for the children. But, he says, the orphanage is also desperate for a health clinic and food.

**Schools for Street Working Children.**

These are not homeless children, but those who work on the streets of Kabul to help support their families. Many are their family's main breadwinners. They beg, run for cabs etc. There is an estimated 40,000 of these children in the city; about half of them are girls. The school is run by an Afghan NGO called Aschiana. Aschiana means 'nest' in the local language.

Ginevra Sanguigno in the crowd.



The women teachers, veiled in their burqas, stand in a blue cluster in the all-male crowd, “These children have nothing, they have lost everything of themselves, so when they are meeting love, that is a great thing for them, and it's a great pleasure for children. So we have seen a lot of war and fighting with our civil wars, so we have seen other trouble in our lives, this is the first time that we're feeling happy.”

Back at the clown house, an Afghan musical group has come to visit. As they play, the men dance, making graceful swirling patterns.



Danny Klllaja “Lanky” enjoys music at the “Clown House”

Gerald Tooth: The band leader, Sardor Mahdu, plays a 200-year-old instrument called a rhubob . . . He explains that under the Taliban, he kept his art alive by practising in secret, protected by a lookout. The punishment for playing music of any sort was to have your face blackened, be sat backwards on a donkey, and be paraded in shame through the streets. Sardor Mahdu was never caught. He says his punishment was having his livelihood destroyed.

Ginevra Sanguigno was invited into a house by some Afghani women: “Yes. They invite us, but the big point is we are here, we are not journalists, we are not doctors in the traditional sense, we are clowns, and this is one point that's very, very strange, they don't know us, but they see us -- very colorful. They see us sing songs, and very friendly and soft and sweet with the children. And they suffer so much. And they are happy just to be near to us because they feel from us some life – life, after so much suffering.

“So we went there. We sang songs and the women just hugged and hugged and hugged us and touch our hands and they don't know, clown, no clown, don't know, because they don't know, no television, but they see us and they feel alive, life. In a country where so much is death present still. So I understand. And what happens. Yes, we sing some, we dance, and they said, 'Please, come here every day', because I know we will heal in this way their sufferings. You are sick not only because you have a leg broken, it is one's sufferings more, more deep, and this is very difficult to heal.”



What can these clowns achieve in such a few weeks? As an ambassador clown you see peoples' hearts and souls. When people are joyful, you see such beauty in the human spirit. It is so sweet, the light that shines in the human heart. The clown brightens that light. There is a Chinese Proverb: "If there is light in the soul, there will be beauty in the person. If there is beauty in the person, there will be harmony in the house. If there is harmony in the house, there will be order in the nation. If there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world."-- Shobi Dobi

The Hospital Clown Newsletter would like to thank The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Gerald Tooth, and Paul Bolger, Web Co-ordinator/Researcher of Background Briefing

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/specials/kabul2002>

