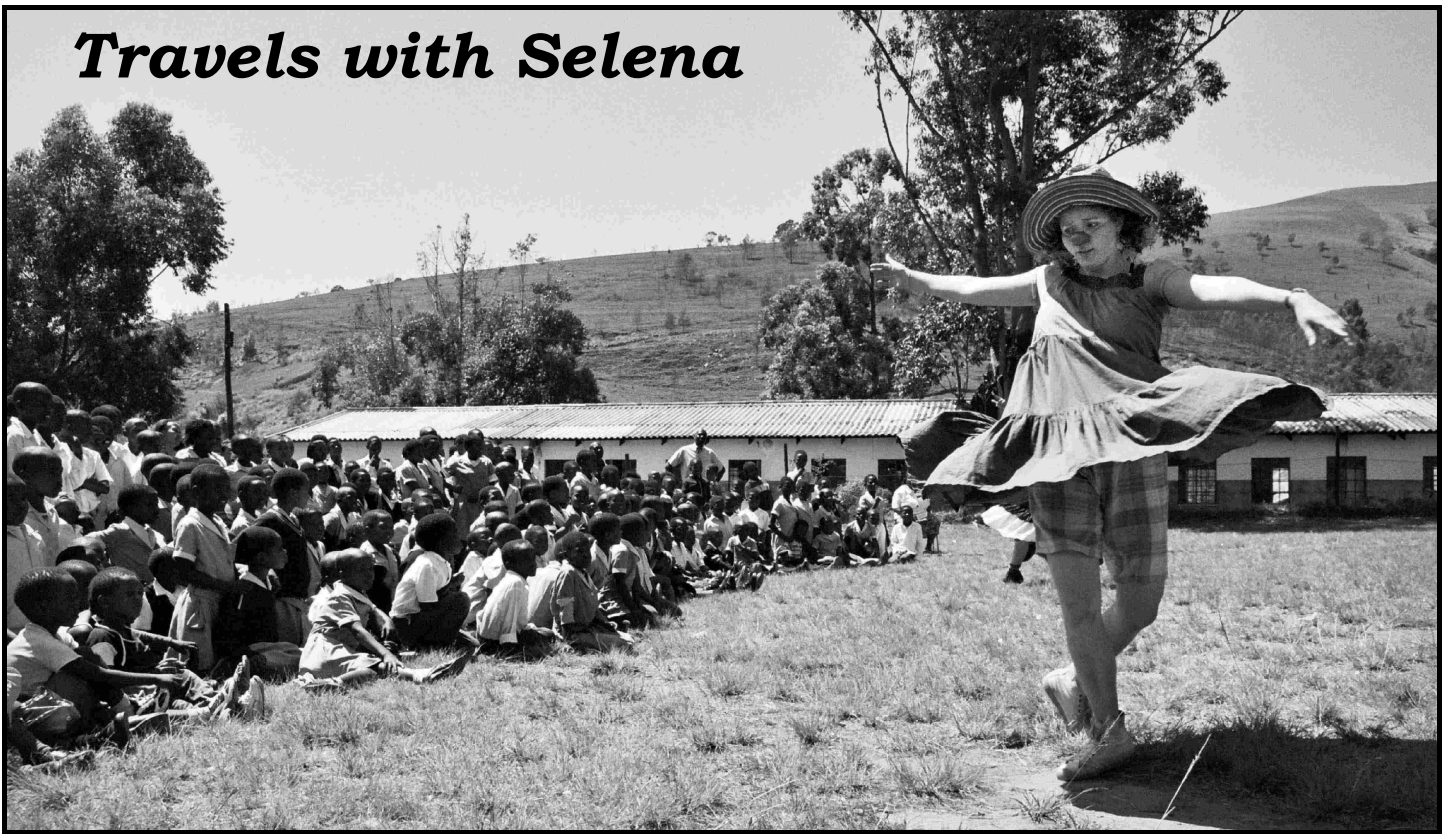


# Travels with Selena



*Selena dancing for children with Clowns Without Borders in South Africa*

**From Selena McMahan** In Vol. 10 No 2 I wrote about my experience working with *Clowns Without Borders* in Southern Africa, visiting the *Upliftment Program* in Cape Town and visiting the *Theodora Foundation* in Johannesburg. I was the recipient of a *Watson Fellowship* for my year-long practical research project: "*Contemporary Clown Circuit: Performance Across Borders.*" I visited and worked with 8 social circus programs and 7 hospital clowning groups, as well as working with *Clowns Without Borders*. I traveled across the globe, visiting programs in 9 different countries. For this installment on my travels, I'm writing about my experience visiting *Circus Elleboog* in Amsterdam, *Le Rire Medécin* in Paris, France and *PayaSOSpital* in Valencia, Spain.

The four months I spent zigzagging across Southern Africa, visiting different programs, and performing 2-4 performances a day in the hot sun with *Clowns Without Borders* were unbelievably fulfilling...and...exhausting. I saw many new things firsthand, learning much about Southern African culture, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, poverty, traveling, and clowning. I decided to try and take things slower and only visited three programs during my two months in Europe.

After a week of rest I visited a children's circus program called *Circus Elleboog* (Elbow) in Amsterdam. They have been in existence for 11 years and run after-school programs and outreach programs for shelters, schools, and street youth. From December 14th - 22nd, I visited and helped out with a number of their programs. A striking one was with a school for children who've been abused or have learning disabilities. Most of the children were immigrants. They had been coming to *Circus Elleboog* for eight weeks. I went to their last class and to the final performance for their families and classmates.

I also went to the second session of a program for children and their parents. It was beautiful to watch these cuddly four year olds

being creative with their parents. When they gathered in a circle to watch each other's routines, each child was snuggled into their parent's lap like baby animals. The room was filled with the kind of parental love, tenderness, and connection that I hardly ever witnessed in Southern Africa. . It was stunning just to watch the parents with their children: A lifetime in each interaction, a million stories. Not just child rearing, physical attention, and care but a magic and love. It was so viscous I could see it, thick between each parent and child.

Four is such a perfect age, the age when a child jumps forward to be a creative partner, the first jump to adulthood maybe. I remember my first memories at four years old, as if it was the first time I started really analyzing the world. I learned how to tie my own shoelaces. But I picture myself curled up against my own mummy, both of us still sleepy in our nightgowns, at four a child is still so physically close to their parent that they can meld into them.

In Lesotho, I met a white board member at one of the orphanages that we worked with. His granddaughter was visiting and when she came to say hello she hugged him tight around the waist. I was instinctively shocked by the gesture but couldn't decide why it struck me so strongly. I thought maybe it was the demonstration of physical attention in front of so many orphaned and abandoned children. And then I thought it was the fact that he was an older authority figure who suddenly appeared emotionally accessible when his granddaughter was free to just throw her arms around his belly. Then I thought it was because I hadn't seen really any men in Southern Africa being physically affectionate with children.

After coming back to Europe and seeing the *Circus Elleboog* program I realized that it was the fact that in Southern Africa, there is a different family structure. There is so much more death, and so many men leave home to go work in the cities. Children are brought up in extended families, very differently from how I grew

up. In so many places I visited, there were so few parental figures and men were especially absent. I hadn't seen any children expressing that kind of parental adoration at all really, because most often there were no parents there. Seeing a glimpse of the cherished relationship between a grandfather and his special grandchild, the kind of relationship I grew up with, but in a Southern African context, hit me like a freight train.

While in Amsterdam, I attended the final performance of Circus Elleboog's program with street youth (funded by Cirque du Monde). The youth were mostly *artsy* European types who had found themselves on the street, addicted to drugs, and in Amsterdam. They were hip, stylish, and almost all of them older than me. The Circus program had helped them come back in control of their lives. Their performance was gorgeous; it had a stunning intellectual depth and poetry. It was also their final show with the program. Cirque du Monde had decided that after funding the same children for a number of years, they should use the money for a new group of youth (which will be composed of young mostly North African and Turkish immigrants).

**Le Rire Médécin, Paris France** I've always been absolutely terrified of hospitals. It was amazing to spend two weeks (Jan 4th - 17th) with Le Rire Médécin and find myself so excited to go to the hospital; I was even excited to go to services where children are really, really, sick with cancers or blood diseases. Le Rire Médécin has been working in French hospitals since 1991. They currently have 46 paid clowns working in 11 hospitals in four different cities. In a single day with the clowns I witnessed so many magical beautiful moments, it was wild. One of Le Rire Médécin's strong beliefs is that there is always more child than disease. They treat the child. In a world of white walls, beeping machines, wires, and white uniforms, the human often gets forgotten. The disease takes over – not so for the clowns. The clowns I visited with were brilliant skilled artists. The ideal. They entered each room on the breath, improvising every interaction, were sensitive to the people around them and really playing. My favorite "scene" was with a boy who the nurses had told us was so depressed he wouldn't come out from under the covers. The clowns went in, delicately talking about the stuff in the room, wondering where the boy was. After a few minutes he was standing up on his bed being a ghost, a monster, roaring, lurching for the clowns, terrifying them, and having so much fun. He spent the rest of the day walking around the floor and chatting with the nurses and the other children.

One afternoon I played in the hospital with two of the clowns. It was a blast; time went by so quickly and it was incredibly different to be playing than observing. The clowns were good to me, calling me Madame Poux (Mrs. Lice), and watching out for me. I fell in love with Le Rire Médécin. The two hospital clowning programs I had visited in South Africa had seemed more like people playing with children or doing silly things to entertain them. The clowns from Le Rire Médécin struck me as "real clowns" - with strong characters - entering a hospital environment and really seeing it and reacting to it with the gaze of a clown. Their clown vision of the world completely transformed the hospital world; through improvised play they were able to relate to absolutely everyone in the hospital. [See Vol. 6 No. 2 on Past Issues at HCN website [www.hospitalclown.com](http://www.hospitalclown.com) for an article on Le Rire Médécin]

**The PayaSOSpital in Valencia, Spain** was amazing as well. I visited them for a week from January 22nd - 28th. To me, they truly felt like the Spanish version of Le Rire Médécin: more laid-back, less intellectually intense with the children, much music. The cultural difference was evident in the clowning and in the hospitals.

Children didn't seem as sick, the parents didn't seem as desperate, I saw more family members hanging out in the hospital, more children being carried in their parents' arms. It seemed to me that the laughter was lighter in a way. PayaSOSpital is a smaller program than Le Rire Médécin, but the services where they work are bigger. (13 clowns in 4 hospitals in 3 cities). They move quickly, seeing lots and lots of children but spending less time with each of them. My favorite time spent with them was their hour at the Down's Syndrome clinic. One clown was trying to dictate a phone number at top speed to the other with all of the distractions and impediments to make it into a brilliant problem to solve. Everyone in the waiting room area was involved: a teenage boy tried to help with getting the number, an older girl bossed everyone around, all of us laughed our hearts out for the hour.

I often thought of Southern Africa while I was in the European hospitals. The most striking difference between the hospitals in South Africa and in Europe was that in South Africa it was always a big room with many children and few nurses. Sometimes the nurse actually left when the clowns arrived because it gave her a break. I saw hardly any family members. At the hospital for children with mental disabilities where I clowning with Upliftment, there was not a single parent to be seen.



In Paris most of the children had their own room. In Valencia, there were about 2-3 children to a room. The diseases also were different. Sometimes I found it hard to see how much money and attention and care was being given to a single terminally ill child, when so many sick children I had crossed paths with in Southern Africa needed just a fraction of that money, attention or care to get better.

Aside from the vast differences between the hospital's environments, the biggest difference between the clown programs themselves was how respected and well informed the Parisians and Valencianos are. They do a transmission with nurses or doctors at the beginning of each day so that they know all the critical information about the children that they see. The hospital staff understands that clowning is difficult, trained work and the clowns are perceived as being professional people outside of their clown characters. They are an integral part of the hospital experience for the staff, children, and families in the services where they work. Everybody knows what days the clowns come and there are postcards of the clowns hung up all over the hospital. It is both very silly work and very serious work.

I am truly glad that I came to Europe and was able to see European clowning in a European context, visit programs with substantial funding, learn about different organizational structures, see different ways of doing projects with similar goals, and go places where I can speak the language and was able to let my guard down. I have learned an unbelievable amount . . . . Next installment: Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico...

Selena's travel diary is at <http://selenamcmahan.blogspot.com>