

Dressing to Fit the Occasion – Shobi Dobi

We clowns in service come from all sorts of different backgrounds. We are singular in our purpose, but our dress can vary from country to country, city to city and occasion to occasion. In my seven years with the newsletter and my various clown trips around the world, I have expanded my idea of what a clown "should" wear.

"Never judge a man until you have walked a mile in their moccasins." Maybe we need to say, "Never judge a clown until you have walked a mile in his/her big shoes." In other words, tolerance and open mindedness may need to replace competition. When we do our clowning in community and world service, we don't compete with each other, nor are we competing for prizes, notoriety, or awards. This is not to say that we are care-less in our dress, but we may need to think a little outside of the circus/community clown box.

As appropriate conduct has to fit the occasion in caring clowning, so does our dress. Shobi has a closet full of clothes and she dresses for whatever occasion she goes to. My "costume" does not dictate my character, it may enhance my character, make me more recognizable as a clown and add a great deal of fun, but it still needs to fit the occasion. Just as I would not wear shorts to the Vatican, I use the same kind of judgement to dress for an occasion to clown.

Hospital Dress

If you tried to walk into the Vatican in shorts, you'd be turned away (a woman that is). It is their rule. Hospital also have rules. They are institutions full of as many rules as clowns have spontaneity. So we have a situation of a round peg fitting into a square hole. We may never make the hole round, but we can soften it with time. Likewise, we have to abide by the hospital rules. They too might soften in time with experience and trust.

Appropriate hospital dress varies from hospital to hospital and country to country. It is pretty clear that in hospitals in the USA, a clown needs to look like a clown (not some crazy person dressed in local thrift store clothes). Even if you do have a name tag, questionable clothes can cause suspicion. Most

hospitals have strict dress guideline for employees and volunteer staff. Being immediately recognized as a clown will put everyone at ease, staff and patient.

So dressing for the hospital, we need to look to our environment and our audience. Appropriate costumes will not get in the way, knock things over or impair vision -- like big shirts, hats. For infection control, it is important to insure that parts of the clown's costume are not so loose that they might become contaminated. (Loose hair, big wigs, floppy sleeves, etc.) Gloves are not worn as they can become contaminated from touching any number of things and people. In the hospital, bare hands are not only easy to wash between rooms, but also they can also be an important part of human contact and touch, as in holding hands.

It is imperative that our costumes are as neat and clean as any other medical personnel. Even though the costumes are bright and colorful, the clown is a part of the hospital team. As responsible professionals, we need to maintain infection control principles.

As the clown is in close contact with patients and staff and need not be seen from a stage or circus stadium, a softer look is often appropriate. Just imagine yourself in a hospital bed. Would you like to see someone dressed as you are dressed walk into your room? Imagine you are three or you are really not feeling good, or you just came out of anesthesia. Colorful yes, loud maybe not.

Just as you clown with caution, dress with caution; however, let's make sure we don't throw out the clown with our caution. In trying to do the right thing and be careful, we don't want to take away from the magic a costumed clown can bring. It is the magic of the theater that engages people in our play. We are artists with individual characters, we don't need regimented uniforms to assure staff that we will be appropriate. There are really no rules in art. Clowning is an art form driven by the spirit of joy and love. By tuning into this energy appropriateness will prevail.

The Hobo Wears a Satin Patch

I have a bag lady character that is dying to get out. She will dress with satin and silk patches with ornate bags -- too many of them. She will go to the finance district

and give out nickels. She will have a wonderful toothless smile (and if I wait long enough to create her, I might just not have any teeth by then). For now she just lives in my imagination. But the idea has prompted me to saying when I teach, "The hobo wears a satin patch." In clown competition the ragged hobo clown is a well put together costume. The hobo clown does not wear the reality of the street dirt! The magic of theater is in its translation of the character. The hobo clown in reality can be neat and clean, while in the magic of theater, remain a tattered hobo

Ambassador Clowning

It has been my experience that In other countries the hospitals are more tolerant of dress than in the USA . Maybe because they don't have the amount of regulation, protocol or law suits that we have. Many clowns dress with only a red nose.

Know your environment and do a little research. The female clowns who went to Afghanistan had to wear their pajama bottoms and scarves on their heads (See photo to the right) -- everything had to be covered. In India, Shobi had to get a vest coat made that went down to her knees as the costume she brought had pants. I was not clowning in a big city where pants are acceptable. It's great to be outrageous, but we need not be offensive.



In Afghanistan a clown all bundled up with her audience all bundled in tradition dress. Ah but there is the red nose.

Shopping for Clothes/Costumes

Take your clown character shopping. What would she or he like to wear? You want to be uniquely you. Just like you choose your everyday job clothes except these are much more fun and can be outrageous. Buy shirts and turtle necks that can be interchanged with clown overalls or bloomers. Whenever you see a piece of fabric you like, buy 5 yards (Warning, then you'll have a linen closet full of fabric like Shobi,).



It is made like the dust cover only with polka dots. Well, it was so hot and humid in China that we were all shedding our layers of costumes. I ended up wearing this as a top with some white pajama bottoms pulled up to show my striped socks. [I have always worn Birkenstocks clogs since an OR nurse told me about them. I have big clown shoes, but they are not always appropriate and often in the way. They are too big to pack and too big to wear for long flights in a tourist class seat. I put matching bows on the shoes, collar and hat. (See below) It has become one of my best ambassador costumes. It is cool, packs flat and easy to make.

Making your own costume:

A couple of hints for making costumes. Use polyester/cotton blends. 100% cotton tends to fade, wrinkle and shrink. Preshrink (wash and dry) all fabric before you cut your pattern.

Double the fabric on your basic costume (pants/jumper/overalls etc) That does mean line them, but actually stitch the lining fabric (I use poly/cotton sheeting to match color) to the surface fabric before sewing the pattern pieces together. It's a good idea to have both pieces of fabric the same poly/cotton blend.

You might think this would make a costume hot, but on the contrary it makes the costume hold shape and not cling to you. It can also be put in a dryer and need little ironing (great when you are traveling). I learned this 15 years ago from Priscilla Mooseburger and it really works!

Make the costume at least one size larger than your normal persona would wear. Avoid any tight fitting areas. Loose clothes will allow air to circulate. Very often you can just have a jumper/overalls or two and just change turtle necks or shirts for variety.

Trimming simple clothes can make them "Clowney." Match bows, hats, and trim. If you want that Ringling look try a different color border on your vest, dress or overall. Trimming with colorful piping or seam binding gives a cartoon look - like outlining in a cartoon character.

How to make a clown bow

Take a rectangular flat piece of foam (½ to ¾ inch thick) the size of the bow you want. Slip the foam into a tube made by folding a piece of cloth. Tuck in each end and sew closed. Take another piece of material and wrap around the center of the rectangle pinching it tight. Secure by sewing by hand. All this can be done with a simple needle and thread.

Easy Matching Cuffs and Ankle ruffles.

Take a tube of cloth 1 to 2 inches and at least 12 inches long. Thread it with a piece of elastic the length to go around your wrist or ankle. Sew elastic ends together. Sew opening closed. This will form a ruffle.



Maria Yeliseyeva and Rodney "Chip" Daly on board the Cemyeyka Volga River Boat Camp in Russia. Maria is wearing a costume that Mama Clown sent to Russia. She said "I am Mama Clown Russia" She certainly is! Maria, an artist, started and heads up Maria's Children a very successful organization which encourages Russian orphans to participate in art programs. Chip, a nurse from the USA, has gone on the boat trips for the last several years. He dresses in casual clown which means he is ready to clown at any time. And he does!

When traveling on some of these ambassador trip, you are clowning all the time, not just in hospitals. It makes it easier to be dressed so that you can always jump right into clowning. It is a very different experience than walk-abouts we clowns are used to where you work for only several hours at a time. On most of these trips you are always "on." Dressing a little more "clown casual" makes it easier to slip in and out of character. Try it sometimes. There are plenty of trips coming up. It's exhausting, but like nothing else you've ever done.