

Clowning around in Guadalajara is a serious business for some

It takes years of practice to become a successful clown, says an experienced exponent of the craft

By Juan Carlos Hernández

It's 7 p.m. on a typical workday, and downtown Guadalajara is shutting up shop. Merchants roll down their metal doors, street vendors pack up their wares and the *calandrias* (horse-drawn carriages) start their long journeys home to the outskirts of the city.

The grey and orange sunset behind the silhouette of the cathedral is sublime, but for most people there's no time for any of that. Commuters and shoppers wave down the roaring, smoke-belching buses and jump aboard. Getting home to one's loved ones is the big issue of the moment.

But for some people in the downtown area, the working day is just beginning.

In the fading light, Charly and Cosquillitas (Tickles) arrive in the Plaza Independencia behind the Teatro Degollado dressed in yellow, blue and red oversized outfits and shoes. They have painted their faces in the same colors, with touches of black and white to highlight the details, and carry an old suitcase, two monocycles and a set of juggling pins.

"Bla, ble, bli, blo, blu," enunciates Charly. Children and adults stop and stare. Charly stares back

and does it louder, but the performance hasn't started. A boy approaches him, curious about the strange sounds.

"What are you doing?" he asks. "I need to warm up the vocal cords and mouth muscles before we start." Charly replies. "That way I can project my voice without yelling."

A few aimless gawkers gather, snacking on nachos, popcorn or fruit. Cosquillitas opens up a suitcase and removes a thick purple foam stick, places it on the ground, and starts to bla and blu too.

By the time the clowns are through warming up, a small, respectably-sized crowd has gathered and it's time for a sound test. Charly and Cosquillitas stand on either side of their performance circle and yell, "Can you hear me?" Some observers nod affirmatively. Those who are not paying much attention are quickly singled out by the clowns and ridiculed for their deafness.

The clowns introduce themselves and ask for applause. Most people clap, but those who don't are again targeted for special treatment. Willingly or not, the audience becomes part of the act and, before long, almost everyone is participating and laughing.

The crowd has now grown from 50 to about 150. In the middle of a roar of laughter, an adolescent who seems to be strung-out on something crosses the performance circle. Cosquillitas calls him an "ugly crazy ape," and tells him not to be rude. The crowd laughs but the "crazy ape" turns around and removes his belt.

Hushed uneasy whispers instantly replace the laughter. The ape rolls up his sleeves and marches up to Cosquillitas. It becomes obvious from the look on his face that Cosquillitas has no idea what to do, so he turns around and takes a hit on the butt.

Charly interjects, "No one messes with my woman's behind." The crowd laughs again, diffusing the young man's anger. He remains for a few minutes still seeking redress for the insults, but his demeanor is no longer threatening.

None of Charly or Cosquillitas' quick thinking, improvisation and humor is scripted. It looks easy and natural. But as Charly (his real name is Carlos Herrera Perez) told me the next day, it took 11 years of arduous training to reach his current level of skill.

"I discovered I had a talent for telling jokes but need motivated me. I had to feed my family somehow, and that's when I thought of being a clown," said Herrera, a Mexico City native.

After a miserable week trying



Charly (left and above) has been a clown for 11 years. With his brother, he gives daily performance behind the city's Degollado Theater, usually starting between 6 and 7 p.m. The crowd always goes away smiling, he notes with pride.

to be a street juggler, Herrera dressed up as a clown, went door-to-door selling jokes and greeting cards. For two years he earned just enough money to maintain his family. Then he tried clown shows, and realized that performing for an audience, unlike telling a joke, could cause embarrassing silence and stark humiliation.

"Being a clown, making people laugh, is a gift and takes a lot of work to develop. People wouldn't laugh when I first started but I stuck with it."

"I followed the legendary French mime Marcel Marceau to Guadalajara from Mexico City. I talked to him and did some workshops, and I've been here since."

In 1993, Herrera began courses in theater and modern dance at the Instituto Cabañas, which proved crucial to his professional development. "The courses gave me a guide for body movement, the use of props, and more importantly

keeping an audience's attention," he explained. In 1994 his brother Anselmo joined him as Cosquillitas.

Last Sunday, the brothers were able to keep people from leaving during a rainstorm that lasted for the entire 90-minute performance. "That tells me that we're good," suggested Herrera.

Herrera believes there's much more to clowning than simply acting the fool.

As he applied the final touches on his make up and slipped into his outfit, Herrera explained, "It's very Mexican to makes jokes of tragedy or difficulty ... A clown gets us in touch with our clumsiness, our humanity, and helps us accept difficulty with hope. It's a balm. I offer that balm to others." Charly and Cosquillitas are available for birthday parties (for all ages) and all types of events, and they can be reached at 3617-8902.

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