

Ira Seidenstein: Clowning and Academia – Part I

A conversation with [Anna-Sophie Jürgens](#) | Section: [Interviews](#)

Abstract: Dr Ira Seidenstein is a professional clown, clown trainer and academic exploring the interface between science and the theatre stage (broadly defined): he is a lecturer, actor, performer, director and author. In the first part of his interview, he explains his approach to research, his understanding of clowning, and the ways he teaches his students to discover the elasticity of their own imagination, and the creativity and performative powers a clown needs on stage.

Editorial Note

Although w/k primarily focuses on the links between fine arts and science, occasionally the journal also welcomes contributions about artists working at the interface of science and art, and about border crossers from other art forms. The interview with Ira Seidenstein introduces an exciting example of the latter.

Preface

Dr Ira Seidenstein is a director of theatre and circus, a clown and comedian who has worked in over 140 live productions. He is the Founder of I.S.A.A.C. – International School for Acting And Creativity – and personally mentors clowns, teachers, choreographers and directors internationally. He holds a M.A. in Visual & Performing Arts, and a PhD in Education, and has worked as an actor, performer, director and auteur of his own live theatre projects. His work has been in circus, theatre, dance, opera, burlesque and in screen work. Some of the larger companies he has worked with include: Cirque du Soleil, Slava's Snowshow, Opera Australia and Bell Shakespeare Company. As a veteran performer he trained for six years in Suzuki Actor Training Method and has worked in 10 Suzuki style productions. He has portrayed over 75 clown characters including: Corteo's White Clown and Dead Clown, and "Harlequin" over an eight-year span. Dr Seidenstein works freelance and since 2006 he has made about 30 visits to Europe from Australia to teach, direct, or perform. In September 2018 he published Clown Secret, a new book about his work and method which examines a mechanical, organic, and intuitive foundation for creativity based on the mind and body.

Dr Anna-Sophie Jürgens works in the fields of Comparative Literature, Popular Entertainment Studies and Science in Fiction Studies, and has a doctorate in Comparative Literature from the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany (dissertation published in 2016 as Poetik des Zirkus: Die Ästhetik des Hyperbolischen im Roman). She is currently a Feodor Lynen Postdoctoral Fellow (Alexander von Humboldt Foundation) at the Australian National University. Her primary research focus is on the popular arts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (in fiction). She is particularly interested in the richness and multidimensionality of the cultural and aesthetic capital of the circus in fiction and other media (embodied, for instance, in violent and cannibal clowns, epileptic dancers and freak performers), on the one hand, and of pathological body aesthetics oscillating between humour and violence (as typified by Frankenstein-clowns and mad scientists), on the other. Over the last few years, she has also developed a special interest in the relationship between popular entertainment, fictional literature and science and technology (regarded as a kind of cultural practice), and therefore in the links between scientific research and creative imagination.

In 2018, Seidenstein and Jürgens have been collaborating on several occasions.

Introducing The Doctor

“The Doctor – as I like to call him not just because he is academically invested with this title, but because of his capacity to see through everyone and make them blossom as human being and artists – literally gives you a practice you can bring home to work, create with and most amazingly it transforms and grows with you.” (Elena Michielin on <https://www.iraseid.com/associates.html>)

Dear Ira, thank you very much for accepting my invitation in the name of the journal w/k to participate in this e-interview about your work, method and experience at the interface of performing arts, clowning and scholarly adventures revolving around science. It is a pleasure and an honour to welcome you. As the introductory quote by your colleague Elena Michielin highlights in a very amiable and likeable way, as a director, performer, teacher and mentor you work with human beings, their (hidden) talents, bodily expressions and creative potentialities. What are your artistic goals?

The central artistic goal is assisting people who have started to excel with the use of my method and the principles of creativity that the method illuminates. Each person and artist is different so it is an organic mentoring process. It is collaborative and co-creative. Part of the process is for each person or team in some cases to re-educate themselves. One of my teachers liked to remind us that to educate or ‘educere’ (Latin) means to ‘draw out’. Philosophically my work is often about what I don’t say to the actor that is secretly the most potent element. For myself teaching, training, studying, and developing new perspectives is a rewarding goal and sharing that is the greatest satisfaction. In recent years a greater variety of individuals took a few quantum leaps with my method and they are creating new formats in theatre, acting, clown, comedy, and dance.

Your method, also known as The Seidenstein Method, is called *Quantum Theatre: Slapstick to Shakespeare*. How has your connection between science (the ‘Quantum’) and clowning evolved? Or, in other words, which are the most important intellectual stages that you went through while developing this method, and how does it link to science?

The science connection with *Quantum Theatre: Slapstick to Shakespeare* is as a layman. I am interested in these few ideas from physics: the observer affects the observed; there is energy potential that is dormant; there are four forces in the known universe; there may be a unifying force. In terms of intellectual stages here are several significant pivot ideas. I found in observation that a good actor could come from any acting method but there was an underlaying unity in the better actor. I located that the unity is on the first layer an integration of body, voice, creativity, performance. Rather than the Cartesian model of separate training for movement, voice, acting, my approach is a continual focus on integration. As a metaphor I reference the unity in ballet of the arms integrated with the legs, posture, breathing, eyes, performance. It is similar in all martial arts that there is a unity of limbs, torso, breath control, and focus. However, I use that with an opposing idea that creativity stems from a mechanical and organic basis. Those seemingly opposing ideas form a base unit, they work together. I saw that if a teacher defined good acting or clown in a specific way then the learner was not able to be porous and break through the established barriers of a definition. Energy in the cells is created in part via the transfer of sodium and potassium through cell membranes. In art the intellect and intuition need to a continual two-way flow.

In the past philosophers were often doctors or were early scientists. Some scientists bring their work to us laypeople. Naturally the ones I will mention are media savvy; Carl Sagan, Brian Cox, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Fiorella Terenzi, David Attenborough. Although I am not a scientist I do approach my work as a teacher, director and theatre artist in a scientific way. I experiment as in a laboratory. I want to find what works, why, how, and under what conditions. Things which are assumed in the profession get approached from a new perspective. For example the plays of Shakespeare which are performed repeatedly and have a history of over 400 years have aspects that have been overlooked or deemphasised.

Used with a 'quantum' approach new insights are found. For example when all of the minor characters are given more focus they work like nitrogen in the soil i.e. the result is healthier plants, more nutrition and more flavour. The benefit is that we find a new creative process in examining the human condition.

Which science, or sciences, have been most relevant or inspirational for your work as a teacher?

Definitely quantum physics as mentioned already. Also, astrophysics, cosmology, microbiology and the world of the cells, viruses, bacteria I find profoundly inspiring. We see that right under and in our noses are universes which we ignore or are insensitive towards. Yet all of those aspects have a great and small influence our very being.

How would you characterise your scholarly work?

My scholarly work is best characterised as eccentric and eclectic and maybe electric but not electronic nor bionic. I simply explore within my given circumstances which have long been unpredictable – life as a vagabond player. I am the type of person who can look at a leaf and be mesmerised by its grace yet never know from what tree it fell. I am happy if a magician like my Uncle Moe does a trick for me half a dozen times and I don't care to work it out. I love the sensation of wonder. On the other hand, in my 'studio' that is whatever performance venue I teach or direct in my consciousness is fine-tuned virtually to a microscopic level. I sense things while I observe outwardly. I am fascinated by a split second. The moment when an actor goes into an artistic trance. Yet that moment may appear to be all things bright and beautiful yet one second later they can be lost down the yellow brick road shoeless and clueless as to how they got so lost. In contrast, some professional performers have such solid concentration that

they forget to listen or to hear or to see or to sense. My scholastic work is on the floor while teaching or directing. I work to pinpoint the universals for all performers, but, accept the unique struggle and discoveries of each individual. All exercises in theatre are an excuse for the actor and director to develop their creative instincts.

Although you completed your dissertation some years ago, you have never stopped studying performance histories and clowning. For instance, you will contribute an academic paper to a special themed journal issue on violence and humour that I am putting together for 2019. You also gave a fabulous - memorable and heavily applauded - paper at my 2018 conference *Imagineers in Circus & Science* at the Australian National University that gave insights into how your research relates to your artistic work and teaching practice. Could you summarise the pivotal ideas of this paper for the readers of w/k? Which connections or interactions exist between the two areas: your academic expertise/research, and your artistic and teaching practice?

The conference *Imagineers in Circus & Science* at ANU gave me an opportunity to share and express my deepest feelings about creative work in the performing arts and the very nature of creativity itself. Creativity is not a result, it is a process. For those who saw my talk they were able to witness the formulated ideas and presentation blended with the spontaneous. We shared creativity unfolding together collectively. I served as the conduit. I've long been fascinated watching films of conductors of symphonies and orchestras. They are electrified. Yet the mathematical and if you will scientific restrictions and formula of the composition is limited in a very detailed way. Yet we see it unfolding via the conductor's interaction with the people, instruments, and the very sound as it is released. I've described the actuality of the presentation as about 70 of us experienced it and participated in the creation of it. From another perspective I was beside myself with excitement as if I were going to give a speech for the Nobel Prize. Over about two months I created from scratch 19 drafts. A few were 45 minutes long for a proposed 20 minutes talk. Then a day after I arrived in Canberra I realised that my talk was a day sooner than I understood. I had a speech I could give. I slept but awoke suddenly about 3am and jumped out of bed and wrote the solution to something I had been contemplating for more than 40 years. A mini eureka. Here is the central concept, verbatim: Here is what I propose. The major clowns and the adept clowns work with an Internal Unity and an Expressive Unity. The Internal Unity consists of four elements: body/mind/feeling/awareness. The Expressive Unity consists of five dualities:

- Duality #1 – Upper and Lower parts of the body working in harmony
- Duality #2 – Inner feeling and outer expression
- Duality #3 – Feminine and masculine lineages in clown ... and the Feminine lineage can incorporate modern dancers and the masculine can incorporate painters I reference (Kandinsky, Klee, Miro, Chagall)
- Duality #4 – The greater clowns combined high skill level in one or more particular skills with having awareness while executing the skill
- Duality #5 – Acting & Clowning comprise a single unity

Could you give us an example, or describe what a 'perfect' clown act - incarnating Internal Unity and Expressive Unity - would look like?

Perhaps the most perfect example is the most famous act of the Russian clown Karandash. In this act Karandash knocks over a life size statue which breaks into a few large pieces. He then goes through a

series of efforts not to be caught while he also tries to mend the statue. Another example available via youtube is the act of Fanny Brice who was the world's first famous female clown. The act I am referring to is *Why? Because*. There are a few versions and one is Fanny doing that duet with Judy Garland. Fanny's clown character is named "Baby Snooks". The benchmark for comedy and clown is considered to be Abbott & Costello's act *Who's On First* which also can be seen in several variations on youtube. In Slava's Snowshow which has been on tour since the late 1990s, the second half of the show begins when the Yellow Clown enters and another clown is sneaking just behind. This is the beginning of a wonderful clown duet which is very physical and artistic so I think it too is a good example of my theory or recognition of the essential duality of great or wonderful clowning "Inner Feeling with Outer Expression". As to what a perfect clown act would look like, I think that any act that incarnates the overall duality of "Inner Feeling with Outer Expression" will be fully enlivened. Of course every performer thinks they are already fully enlivened. They are, but, not necessarily to the level I think we should emulate. As the Gershwin tune says "It ain't necessarily so".

Harmony of the body (and mind), heightened awareness - these are also essential components, if not prerequisites, of good academic presentations. Based on your experience in attending a plethora of academic talks by speakers from different disciplines, what can academics (scientists in particular) learn from your method and practice?

I would say that scientists often already have a rich creative life. For each of us if we travel, or go to a gym, or a concert, or immerse ourselves into reading a novel, or go for a walk or take a hike we can come back to our work or research refreshed and often with a new insight. My method, practice, workshops offer an actual physical experience of how focus and play interact on the floor so to speak, in action. An academic for example by learning a few of my exercises and embracing the principles involved, would gain confidence in making presentations. For example *The Nothing exercise* appears to be simple. It is simple. The exercise teaches in action how your body itself can directly assist your confidence in speaking or presenting or even standing in front of a group. In the exercise, in a split second the participant will have the magic of their imagination triggered. However, if an idea precedes the action of the body the mind and imagination often get stuck on a loop. Whereas if the body comes first the mind's imagination proves to be limitless. There is a negotiation between ones conscious and subconscious mind. It is a remarkable exercise which begins to let even an advanced thinker become a tinker with new attributes. In fact, what often happens is there are suddenly more ideas coming forth from within the body than one ever imagined. These are things which scientists are familiar with, but, the pleasure of applying their intellect directly to their body is pure pleasure and rejuvenation. It can be a challenge too – nothing ventured nothing gained. The Nothing exercise is pure and simply magical or majestic.

If invited to collaborate with a scientist (from any science discipline) and given an inexhaustible amount of funding, what would you do?

To collaborate with a scientist here is one way to start: have a brief talk to find: a) a possible overall concept, or, three or more options b) decide on a practical starting point, or, three or more options. I would suggest an inside/outside approach. The inside would be the science information and the outside would be the performance or improvisation. For example, we had a wonderful presentation at the *Imagineers in Circus & Science conference* from a scientist who works in the field of parasites. I think you gave a talk relating clowns as parasites. We could take a mechanical creative approach and he could give me three types of parasites and explain their differing properties and I could improvise with

each type. I could within an hour create a scenario of one clown or actor dividing emotionally into expression of those three types. In one hour I could create a 3 to 7 minute act or scenario. That becomes the 'philosopher's stone' or creative launch pad and we can begin the practical process. Now whether the goal is to illuminate the science or to create theatre are divergent objectives. Of course there are examples of where they meet within theatre for the purpose of education, and, there are examples where the theatrical story or event uses science as fodder for creativity. On the other hand, relating your idea of clowns as parasites I could improvise on that theme without scientific consideration. After the improvisation or enacted scenario based on an idea the scientist could give feedback in the form of questions, suggestions, observations and we can process those immediately with further work on the scenario or improvisation.

Part 2 *Clowns and Scientists* will appear soon. Dr Jürgens will encourage Dr Seidenstein to provide his definition of clown; the example of yoga as science of body and mind and how it is applied in *Quantum Theatre: Slapstick to Shakespeare*; and will discuss the cultural lineage of creativity and science which extends into Dr Seidenstein's creative process.

Post picture above the text: Cover picture of the book *Clown Secret: Ira Seidenstein* (2018).

Tags

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