

# SEND IN THE CLOWN

**Asked to stand up in front of the school, IAN BILLINGS, does what comes naturally : to act the fool and invite children to do the same**



I'm in a small primary school somewhere in the midlands and I'm performing my stand-up literacy show. I've been touring the show since its inception at the Edinburgh Festival in 2007 and it has taken me to many far flung and exotic places such as Vietnam, Moscow, Dubai, Australia and now Bloxwich. I'm peering out over a mass of giggling faces peering eagerly up like a gaggle of Nemos in the petting pool. Every word is hung on, every joke, every voice, every moment - I know I'm an event in the school, I know I'm going to more interesting than double maths but there's something more happening here and it's to do with the compulsion of invention.

My school visits usually commence with a series of creative writing workshops with years 4, 5 and 6 looking at Character, Setting and Plot which, over about six years, I've honed to their chucklesome finest. I usually start off with a seemingly serious intent until an idea, a thought, a joke from the crowd distracts me and I find myself drawn in an irresistible direction - apparently accidental but very much contrived - and within seconds I'm being subversive and naughty and seemingly off-message and, thus, given license to clown. So through these sessions - I clown, I joke, I improvise and, most importantly, I compel. I create a mutually respectful arena in which being funny comes foremost - once everyone realises it is a forum for fun the ideas start to come in tidal waves. And all ideas are respected and accepted and, as long as they stay within the bounds of decency and age-appropriateness, they all get thrown into the pot. There seems to be a moment early in each session when everyone clicks and a communal penny drops. This is free, this funny, this is ours. I thought-track their ideas, develop them in my own way and allow more and more ideas to be added. I'm building a rhythm to the invention, a beat that's thrilling and compelling. Ideas follow ideas - some complimentary, some contradictory, but all welcome. Making the ideas welcome is vital. I stir up a sense of ownership and entitlement - an entitlement to imagine. And once they're making me laugh - they are equal to me. Not a contrived, patronising laugh - kids spot that straight away - but a full-hearted, belly-hugging guffaw you'd find in any city comedy club. Then we're on the same side and they have taken license to invent something unique and personal to them but, most importantly, valuable to their peers. And it builds and builds modulating to a swirling whirl of delirious madness, surrealism and fun - which, at its highest, is profound.

Then it all stops. I deliberately stop the flow. Paper is handed out and I silence the room for the next few minutes, despite the eagerness to giggle, invent and contribute I restrain any further speaking. For the next few moments all they will do is nothing. Nothing, but imagine. I make a tonal shift and the voice is softer, gentler and slower - leaving large gaps between words - I change the heart beat of the room and allow them to simply think. I recap the ideas and rules I offer for invention. I remind them of the structures I suggest and hold this moment for as ...long ...as... I... dare.

Then I give them the "Go!", there's usually a minor surge of mumbled mutters like awaking sleepers, but then the writing starts. Reluctant writers sit side by side with Gift and Talented writers scribbling swift outlines, observations, jokes, descriptions from elementary thoughts to inspired notions. All compelled to invent, to contribute, to imagine. The quality of the writing and the commitment doubles, triples by the compulsion to equal or better what has gone before - not in a competitive "my dad's bigger than your dad" way - but by a compulsion to make as good a contribution to the group as possibly can be made. And make each other laugh.

So, back to Bloxwich, and I'm holding the microphone staring out at these eager eyes and, when most comics from the grown-up world are nibbling nails and sweating buckets, I'm happily sharing my thoughts with the people who kindly shared theirs with me. It's reciprocal respect and it's joyous. Whether it be the Mona Lisa or the Internet, the compulsion to create and invent is instinctive, primal and vital. Restraining or constraining the desire, the need and the entitlement to create and invent is deleterious. We must continue to develop and evolve forums and arenas in which those compulsions are sacrosanct - we must compel children to invent and ask "What if?" - because somewhere out there one of them knows the answer. I know they do, because I can hear them giggling.

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