Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Perfect Circle of People, or… Karma, Coincidence, and Clowns

Eric · Wednesday, January 2nd, 2019

Sometimes… on a certain night…. or on a certain day…. or in a certain moment, people come together in your life… in an inexplicable, maybe karmic, and if you believe in it, even in a magical way. There's no logic for it. It's just something like "life is stranger than fiction".

I don't think it's just coincidence… or synchronicity… like randomly asking directions from the first two women you see on the street in Kuta Beach, Bali, Indonesia, at the turn of the millennium in the year 2000. And then having one of those women become your wife — my wife, now of seventeen years. No, *that* was just coincidence. Or synchronicity. But it needed some follow-through after the initial event. Some talking, some flirting, some miming (she didn't speak any English), some mutual loneliness – to advance the situation. To bring me back to Bali six months later. To bring her to Los Angeles six months after that. We were pro-active. There were questions asked. Invitations extended. Answers given. Plane tickets bought. Flights made… flights missed. It was the stuff of "developing a relationship", no matter how odd, no matter what the difference in years, in language, in culture, in personality. It was what became… a marriage. Our marriage. Coincidence, synchronicity, and choice.

But when I retired from my full time professorial job at USC in 2017, it wasn't the normal question of choice or coincidence that I was worried about: "What are you gonna do once you're retired?" No, I had answers to that one: "I'm gonna follow my nose, follow my bliss, wake up, write, correspond with friends, walk the dog, re-discover my City, listen to 14 hour history books on Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Genghis Kahn; I'm going to bring up my newly-adopted, eight year Indonesian old son. Wake him up at 6:30 in the morning, help him get dressed, feed him breakfast, get him to school on time, do his homework with him, teach him English. I'll have a *new* full time job. Mr. Mom. With lots to do. I'm not worried at all."

What I *was* worried about was – health care. Health insurance. Medical providers. Who? Where? How much? I was terrified. I knew I had been living in the well-managed cocoon of academia for 31 years, more than comfortable with benefits like life insurance, accident insurance, long-term

care insurance, and most important of all… health insurance. *That* was the big one.

It took me three years to figure it out – the entire length of my "phased retirement" to worry, to research, to call, to text, to apply, and then to finally transfer our three family members' health insurance to – Kaiser, an HMO… where we'd have to use *their* doctors, not a PPO's doctors of our own choice. But still… at considerable cost. And even though I now qualified for Medicare, there were my wife and my growing boy, both healthy, but still, both costly. We didn't qualify for Obamacare, so the only option was to… suck it up and pay.

I was resistant to Kaiser. To making the change. To making any change. That's my personality. That's human nature, right? But change was… required. Even though I really didn't want to give up my doctors of so many years, doctors who knew my personal medical history, my family's medical history, my bones, my muscles, my internal organs, my blood pressure, and my hypochondria. But… I let financial realities rule, so change… I did. To Kasier.

First… I found my son, now ten years old, a Kaiser pediatrician. It was like picking a number out of an online hat. How could I choose amongst all Kaiser's pediatricians? I looked at the online photos. Read the medical stats. Looked at the photos again. Used my intuition, closed my eyes, and… stabbed at one. Doctor John Tierney.

A week later, me and my son, Exsel, show up at Kaiser Glendale. It's not too far from home, Echo Park, and that's where Dr. Tierney practices. We check in at the big HMO's downstairs lobby, and we ride the elevator upstairs to the second floor, across from the pharmacy. There are scores of people waiting for prescriptions, but not many waiting for a pediatrician. Soon… acceptably soon… they call my son's name, "Exsel Manalu-Trules?" We go in. Height, weight, temperature, blood pressure, the same routine as for adults. I mean, what do I know? I'm a first time father at age 68! We're led into the exam room by the nurse. And we wait just a bit more.

Then there's the customary soft knock at the door, and in comes… Dr. Tierney. He's young, maybe forty, clean cut, clear-eyed and professional looking. He's friendly too. Good with Exsel. Very thorough. I like him. We chat a bit. Somehow I tell him that I've just recently retired from USC. His eyes light up with excitement. He tells me proudly and enthusiastically that his wife – is studying – clowning – with a USC professor. I ask his name. "David Bridel. A young Brit." Of course, I know the man. Very well. He's the new Dean of my School. USC's School of Dramatic Arts, and Dean Bridel is not only a surprisingly-knowledgeable academic scholar on "clowning", but he's also a first rate…. clown himself.

I should know.

Oh, just in case you didn't know from the many other times I've written about it, I used to be a clown too. A professional one. "Gino Cumeezi". That was my name as a clown.

I, I mean Gino, ran for Mayor of New York City in 1977 against Ed Koch and "finished 5th out of 4 candidates!" My campaign slogan was "Put a *real* clown in Gracie Mansion". It was fun. I taught my own style of clowning for years, and I also founded and directed NYC's Resident Clown Troupe for five years. I saw great clowns like Bill Irwin, from the Pickle Family Circus, and David Shiner, from the Cirque de Soleil, do their brilliant clown duet, "Fool Moon", on Broadway. I

remember Emmett Kelly's sad hobo clown, Weary Willie, pushing a broom in Ringling Brothers Circus when I was a kid, and I've seen all the Chaplin and Keaton films. And although I taught clowning just once at USC, and I haven't "clowned" myself in several decades…. I think it's absolutely true: "once a clown, always a clown". It's a lifelong brother or sisterhood.

And so every time my son sees Dr. Tierney, he tells me more about his wife's… clowning. Who else she's been studying with. How devoted she is to learning. She's also a doctor, a pre-natal care MD, and she wants to combine her medical practice with clowning… into a developing field called "medical clowning". If you know Patch Adams from the film of the same name starring Robin Williams, then you know something about the field. And it turns out that Dean Bridel has started a new program at USC in, of all things, medical clowning.

Anyway, I like Dr. Tierney so much that I ask him to become my PCP, primary care physician. That's the way the HMO works. Everything goes through the PCP. He's Kaiser's first contact, the HMO's gate keeper. Unfortunately, because Dr. Tierney is a pediatrician, Kaiser won't let him treat adults and become my PCP. I'm disappointed.

But then, I take a bad fall on a tennis court and really smash my right clavicle. I see a Kaiser orthopedist who I'm not crazy about, and then lo and behold, I find out that Dr. Tierney is *also* a sports medicine doctor who CAN treat adults. Lucky me. I get to see Dr. Tierney after all, and he gets me x-rays, sends me to a physical therapist, and…. continually tells me about his wife, the aspiring and constantly-studying, clown.

Ok, so there are the different and seemingly random elements – a pediatrician cum sports medicine doctor at a new HMO, his wife, Mona, who I've never met but who is rabidly studying clowning, a USC Dean who's also a clown, and yours Trulesly, a recently-retired USC professor/clown.

Then….. I read in November 18th's LA Times about a super clown who has recently taken over running the Lyric Hyperion Theatre in Silver Lake. Right near me, in Echo Park. The man's name is Phil Burgers, aka Dr. Brown (his "nom de clown"), and he studied at École Philippe Gaulier outside Paris with the same man who trained Roberto Benigni and Sacha Baron Cohen. That makes him legit in the clown world. And on top of that, his most recent hour-length, silent clown show, "Befrdfgth" (a clown-named show if I ever saw one) – just recently won every award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival… where my own solo show was "Shortlisted" as "Best Show of the Fringe" back in the Ice Age, 1988. Still some more synchronicity and possible magic; I definitely want to meet this man. Maybe even revive my dormant clown derby in one of his classes.

Then… I get an email (I've already signed up for the Lyric Hyperion mailing list), that Phil aka Dr. Brown, will be doing his "Befrdfgth" show for 3 nights only in early December, as a benefit for the Theatre. I buy a ticket the minute I tap and change windows. December 4, the first show, 8 pm. I have high hopes, which if I'm being entirely honest, I don't have very often. Perhaps too many shows… too many disappointments.

Then… I hear from Mona… Dr. Tierney's wife, who… along the way… has become my Facebook friend. I still haven't met her, but it's fun to exchange clown *esprit de coeur* on social media. I

invite her to “Befrdfgth”. On December 4th. 8 pm. She, in turn, invites her husband, my son’s and my pediatrician and sports med doc. Groovy. We’re excited.

December 4th. 7:30 pm. I arrive at the theater wearing a black and white striped thermal shirt and a crushed gray felt, short-brimmed hat that was given to me in Romania. It’s a shout out to the international family of clowns. I even bring my “Cumeezi” scrapbook from my old clown days in New Yawk – just to show Mona & the doc.

I see them right away. Standing in the outdoor Lyric courtyard. Mona is lit like a street lamp. Super excited. Her husband, Doc Tierney, looks like he’s been dragged along, but he’s a good sport. We exchange hugs and hand shakes. It’s sort of strange to see my doctor in a social setting… when he knows about my cancer in 1989 and the impressive list of all my meds. But it’s definitely fun too. I give then my scrapbook and we pass a few minutes of nostalgic clown talk until… lo and behold… there is Dean David Bridel standing in the courtyard – by himself. He’s carved out some time out of his busy schedule to come see “Befrdfgth”. As I said, “once a clown, always a clown”. It’s a small family. He comes over, and of course he knows Mona, who has recently studied with him, and he meets the good and amiable Doc Tierney. Mona snaps photos. I clown. Dean Bridel forces a huge smile. Mona bares a raucous silver tooth. We’re all a happy and excited family.

It’s a communal, karmic, clown moment. A *magical* clown moment. Maybe a gift from the eternal clown Gods. Where clowns from different eras, different generations, different geographies, different persuasions – have all come together in the court yard of a Silver Lake theater… where indeed, magic is *supposed* to happen. Hell, maybe it’s even one of Spalding Gray’s “perfect moments”. Coincidence, synchronicity, and magic – all in one. A perfect circle of people, time, and place, Oh Boy.

Next – we naturally go into the theater – to see the show. It’s packed. I’m amazed. How did so many folks come out on a Tuesday night – to see a clown show? In fact, how did clowns even come to be popular in LA; they certainly never were back in the day. Long before they became so feared in modern society, where main stream media has turned them into child molesters and psycho killers. Stephen King. IT. “Look out, run for your life, it’s a clowwwn!”

It’s always bugged the crap out of me. C’mon, people, clowns are fun. They’re funny. They make you laugh; speak truth to power. They take a pie in the face to make you giggle. They tug at your heart strings. Pathos, slapstick, white face, comedy, people! “Are you kidding, Trules? Forgetaboutit.”

Like try convincing my 11 year old son and his addicted Fortnite-playing classmates. “Clowns are scary, Pak Trules.” (That’s what he calls me. Pak Trules.) “They’re ugly and horrible. They kill people!” It’s a losing battle.

Still, the good news is – there are suddenly so many working clowns in LA: Matt Walker of The Troubies, David Bridel of USC and The Clown School, and now Phil Burgers of the Lyric

Hyperion in Silver Lake. It's great.

The good Dean and I are sitting in our seats amidst the high energy buzz, talking about all things clown, when I show him my jacket, thinking that maybe "it" is responsible for some of the night's synchronicity and magic. You see, it's a gray wool and black leather-sleeved Hollywood production company jacket that says on the back: "Allied Stars – Winner of 4 Academy Awards".

Allied Stars? Well, that's the film company that produced the Oscar-winning "Chariots of Fire" back in 1981, and Dodi Fayed, the billionaire who died in the car crash with Princess Diana in 1997 , was the Executive Producer. And this jacket I'm wearing – actually belonged to Dodi. It was *his* jacket. On the set. How did I get it? That's another story, but Dean Bridel, being a historically-informed Brit, is totally amazed that I have Dodi Fayed's jacket. "That would be worth a lot of money on E-Bay, Trules", he says incredulously, and that's when… "Befrdfgth" begins…

Dr. Brown makes the longest and best stage entrance I've ever seen. Over about 5 minutes and 10 false starts, he actually never even appears from behind the long black curtain. Instead…. the curtain comes out onstage… itself… and then… retreats… itself. Many times. Perfectly timed. Funnily-timed. Then… in a super-clever, *extended*-curtain trick, the curtain comes out *into* the audience. It snatches a program, steals my gray felt hat, climbs over audience members… makes fun and mischief and laughter… all… without a word…. just like all great clowns do… but this time…. without even being seen.

Finally, Dr. Brown is revealed wearing a long dress-like something or other with a long, plastered-down, straight-haired black wig – with bangs. He's wearing a veil. Weird indeed. And funny. Dr. Brown continues to not say a word for the next hour. He's totally silent. And raucously funny. A little lascivious and prurient at times. Sweet and broken-hearted at others. The best clown I've seen since Irwin and Shiner. In fact, he has the perfectly-choreographed bits of stage business like Bill Irwin, combined with the brilliant audience improvisation of David Shiner. A total and hysterically-funny delight.

I could go on… but you have to see the show for yourself. You won't be sorry.

After the show, Dean Bridel introduces me to Phil. Of course, they've studied at the same clown school, École Philippe Gaulier in Paris, and of course, they know each other. They didn't study at the same time, but that's exactly how lineage is passed through the clown annals of time. I meet Phil, I congratulate him, he gives me his email address, and who knows? Maybe I'll be reviving some new incarantion of the retired Gino Cumeezi in collaboration with Dr. Brown.

In any event, it was a full circle night. Full of random people coming together in a magical theatrical moment. The good Dr. Tierney, my son's and my pediatrician and sports med doc. The brilliant Dr. Brown, star and instigator of the night's karmic synchronicity. Dean David Bridel, clown brother and my most recent boss at USC. And clown novitiate, Mona Hanouni, Dr. Tierney's wife, who one day soon, I'm sure, will be clowning for kids in hospitals around the world.

What more can I say?

“Don’t trust leaders. Watch your parking meters.”

Hope you’ve vicariously enjoyed your journey down clown alley….

Yours in magical funny business,

Trules (aka “Gino”)

More about Trules on his Website

Listen to his podcast, “e-travels with e. trules” HERE

This entry was posted on Wednesday, January 2nd, 2019 at 9:43 pm and is filed under Theatre, Visual Art
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.