

# Haydn with bells, politics and clown nose.

FILOMENA NAVES

**Festival.** Bolina gathered clowns worldwide in the Azores and showed new trends. Humor and social response running one beside the other.

Is it possible to play Haydn with bells without losing the composer's tonality? It may sound strange but the truth is: it's possible! The Austrian Tanja Simma, or rather her Clown Anna de Lirium, did it in Ponta Delgada, Azores, a few days ago in the popular area Arco 8. This unexpected sounds of mix of orchestral classic sounds with bells played by Anna de Lirium in the right tune following the score with a huge belief made the audience laugh out loudly.

But that was only one of many fun moments of the highly entertaining show *The Substitute* which Tanja presented in Bolina, the first International Festival of Clowns in the Azores, organized by the cooperativa cultural Descalças an the Associação 9'Circos.

The musical comedy of the Austrian clown has a bit of everything: humor, classical music, heavy rock, dance that leads to dizziness and misconceptions that Tanja exploits until madness, where, besides, her name comes from: de Lirium.

*The Substitute* has been created a year and a half ago. Since the première in 2013 in Vienna, Austria, Tanja has already performed in Spain, Belgium, Poland, Germany, Switzerland and Brazil, among others, and now this show is going to be presented in Portugal, Sao Miguel, Azores. "But the show" she says "is still growing and has much potential for discovery. There are always new things happening, little improvisations and spontaneous interactions with the public during the live performance" she explains.

Basically what we see is the story of a woman in search of employment. She has to wait alone in a shop of musical instruments for the boss to arrive in order to have a job interview. The boss is late and she gets a very firm order that she should not touch anything. The comedy develops from this point where her desire to touch everything happens to her as a huge temptation: she can not do without. She is unable to resist: Anna plays Haydn with the bells, plays with a device that transforms her voice and provokes big laughter, plays a saw by turning it into a Cello and even plays a little guitar with which Anna first interprets a very innocent "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" only to later transform herself into a furious rock star. Finally, Anna finds work - as a maid .... But not for long, because she decided to subvert her destiny: she puts a red nose on a broom and sings with him a very hilarious duet of a song by Sinatra.

In "Arco 8" the audience laughed for almost an hour and the applause did not end. A reaction that Tanja also observed in other Latin countries: "It happened the same way in Spain and Brazil" she says, highlighting that these countries are more open. At home for example "people are much more critical. We have to conquer them, earn the applause".

This is what she has done for almost three decades. In Austria "the clowns and even more the women clowns are not very considered figures" Tanja Simma says. And so "there is no space to create or perform clown shows, except sometimes in cabarets."

## The development of the modern clown

Despite the lack of openness to the art of clown in her country, Tanja eventually "chose this life practically by instinct", she says. "I was 18, I had just finished high school and I didn't quite know what to do in life. I always heard music at home, I was playing the piano and singing, but I didn't want to become either a pianist or singer, or a music teacher. Then one day a friend said to me she was going to become a clown, and I, without thinking, told her 'me, too!' "

So it happened. She studied "music and movement education" at the University for music and performing arts in Vienna, and was still studying when she started working with the "Red Noses Clowndoctors" in Vienna. This group grew and became international, and Tanja has been working with them until today. "They gave me a good formation and that training has been going on until today as part of the annual workshops which are now also international.

Today with a solid career which includes two seasons in Cirque du Soleil between 1999 and 2001, co-founding the "Theater Olé", the first theater for clowns in the Austrian capital and participation in festivals around the world in addition to regular interventions in hospitals " in hospitals I always use the red nose, on stage usually not" - Tanja has spent 27 years of her life making people laugh.

In these almost three decades "the clowns have not gained a better status in Austria. What has changed is the fact of having more hospital clowns now who gained more visibility."

This expansion of hospital clowns has happened not only in Austria but throughout the world - around here too. This type of intervention is now also one of the most visible facets of the movement called the modern clown, of which the Peruvian **Wendy Ramos**, trainer, sponsor and participant of the Bolina festival in the Azores, is one of the international exponents. Wendy found her way when she did a workshop in Argentina in the 1990s, where she got to know the new artistic trends of the modern clown with roots in the 1960s.

Far beyond the traditional duality 'rich clowns-poor clowns' the contemporary clown intervenes in all stages including disadvantaged neighborhoods, areas of conflict or disaster and has comedy, humor and communication, human warmth, interaction with others and even political criticism, as does the french **Hélène Gustin**.

Hélène was also in the Azores with her alter ego **Colette Gomette** and the show *La Dictatrice* - "vote for me" Colette asked with her red nose and striped stockings handing out flyers to the audience in her particular style. With this work Hélène does "a parody of power" and at the same time she reaffirms the power of humor "who has just received a terrible blow with the massacre of the cartoonists of Charlie Hebdo" she recalls. She was in Paris at the time and hardly finds words to talk about it. "It's terrible when something like this happens, when it kills the humor and the humorists" she unloads. "Being a clown" she says "is not only make people laugh."

### **Clowns all-terrain**

Wendy Ramos is one of those that put this motto into daily practice. It was shortly after the formation in Argentina where she decided to be a clown. "In Peru there was nothing like that at the time, so she did a lot of training and created a group, the Pataclaun."

Television invited them to do a series of successful programs so were on air for two years. After she became a trainer herself and created the Asociación Bolaroja, clowns all-terrain, in Peru in 2001 that besides the clowns activities in the hospital also develops social interventions in poor neighborhoods like Belén (region of Peru) or disaster areas. "We travel a lot and have developed close ties with other clowns, this is a very emotional activity, very strong" she acknowledges.

Wendy presented her last show *Cuerdas* for the first time in Portugal at the Bolina festival, her first solo after a more than 25-year career. The show reflects on the ties that prevent us from living, often with our own connivance.

Attached by a rope - literally - imposing tight limits Wendy, with her clown nose - "I use it always when I work, I am less vulnerable" she explained - unfolds in *Cuerdas* the edge of her own history with her small and big memories, her small and big actions and encounters, and laughs also of herself. In the end, of course, she unties and, with her nose, leaves the scene ... for life.

Perhaps Austria, Haydn's homeland - and other great figures of music, science or philosophy, as Freud and Wittgenstein - the clowns are not considered culture, says Tanja Simma. But it is perhaps a matter of time. As showed at the Bolina festival, the work of these clowns on several stages - with all kind of audiences - from the most formal to the slums and hospitals - there is everything. Or almost everything. And next year, Bolina, who now created the first global network of women clowns, will be back.