

# A Pox Is Born

*Patricia Rockman*

I have danced a striptease to the death, created the world, and unwittingly given birth to the first human. I have been the winged and seductive fairy godmother cruelly granting wishes, making cosmetic surgery go awry. I have been an old woman, manipulative and dependent, clinging to her daughter who would escape if she could. But she can't. As a sadist I have met my masochist. Love is to be found in the strangest places. And I have been a Southern Baptist minister liltng a eulogy in gibberish for my beloved partner on the path. She will not let go, and ultimately I must be the Grim Reaper taking her to the other side.

I am a clown. Not the party type or therapeutic, although one could argue I deliver therapy of a kind. By day I am a physician focused on mental health. At first, work informs art. In our performance pieces medical accoutrements and references abound, from tumours to catheters, surgery to placentas. The themes are about “dredging the psyche,” as Allan Wallace would say. Clowning, like therapy, can be a path to liberation.

I am part of a duo, Pox and Vendetta, à la Mump and Smoot, the clown kings of North America. Mump, a.k.a. Mike Kennard, takes me into the Pochinko tradition of clowning, a magic realm that sits between terror and excitement. Here there are rules, and living by them transforms me into Pox, my character who is inhabited by both a pestilence and a kiss. Live up and out! Don't look down. If you do, you are thinking too much or judging yourself. Be honest and present. More, more, more is the rule if it's working. Change it if it isn't. A clown never gives up. Follow the rule of three: repeat an action twice and change it up the third time. Care enough not to care. Know that mistakes are gifts from



Vendetta (Elaine Smooker, *left*) and Pox (Patricia Rockman, *right*)

the gods. Use them. Learn from them. Always protect your audience. Notice everything. It doesn't take long to realize that these are laws to live by; the path of the clown is also a journey toward awakening.

Being in medicine, physicians are blessed to bear witness to myriad life offerings. We are allowed to see deeply into people, given permission to be intimate physically, psychologically, and emotionally in ways others cannot. It is a serious business. But Pox and Vendetta get to play, to shock, to be outrageous, and to explore what it is to be human, using humour to lighten what is often so difficult for us to turn toward. As in therapy, we work with what won't go away: dissatisfaction, resistance, dependence, obligation, wanting, revulsion, ambivalence, need, sexual desire, love, and letting go.

Clowning is freeing and joyful, alive. It is not dissimilar to the feeling we sometimes have when we are truly present with a patient, transparent and intimate, often uncomfortable yet willing to stay in, and so awake that we have epiphanies. We experience those rare moments of growth as we move toward health, reducing the self/other divide, experiencing our interdependence that is part of being human. This is not to say that we become confluent with the other but rather are able to highlight our similarities versus our differences. At their best, clowning and the practice of therapy enhance our empathy for those who suffer.

I study Bouffon with Adam Lazarus and learn about the medieval clown, the clown of the court, a misfit, the deformed and ostracized. I learn to relish being ugly and foolish, to let go of my sense of self and my vanity. It is also liberating. He teaches me a new rule as Pox, to "Watch out, here I come," entering a room riding a dragon and sending this ferocity through the eyes. I teach this as a therapeutic technique to a patient who is socially anxious, afraid to compete on the squash court. She wins. I pass on the clown rules to another who, at forty-four, is re-exploring her sexuality, flying to Paris to see a man she met online. Up and out—you go girl! I reiterate to a group of family practice residents I am teaching that "mistakes are gifts from the gods" in an attempt to reduce their shame at their lack of perfection. It is then that I realize the lines are blurring. I no longer know where the clown begins and the physician ends. I am now finally both clown and doctor merged into the composite being that Pox has become.

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