This chapter takes the reader on the journey from self-discovery to character discovery – the journey the actor takes to create a Shakespearean clown or fool by applying the roots of personal clown creation and improvisation investigated at the Lecoq School.

I begin with the red-nose clown as it was taught at the Lecoq School. Referencing my experiences as a student (1984–86) and Lecoq’s *The Moving Body* (2000) as inspiration, I will articulate the application of Lecoq’s clown to playing clown roles in the plays of Shakespeare.

For our final capstone presentations at the Lecoq School in 1986, each second-year student was given a phrase, a command, tailored for us individually by Jacques Lecoq. We were asked to act, write, or direct an eight-minute piece of original theatre based on his command using any one of the dramatic territories. I chose clown, my favorite, and at that time the last dramatic territory taught at the school.

The first year had been a ‘precise body of work’ that was to remain as ‘our point of reference’ (Lecoq, 2000: 97). The second year moved to the dramatic territories with an eye toward dramatic creation. In clown, the last territory, we turned our eyes on ourselves.

With an internal catalogue of embodied images from the experiences of the prior two years, we were ready to find what my teacher, Norman Taylor, a student and then teacher at the Lecoq School in Paris for 20 years, described as ‘that which in each of us transmits our frailties, our strengths, our successes, and our failures. The other side of our nature, the side that seldom sees the light of day’; the clown was to reveal not our ‘child within so much as our other self, our ridiculousness, not our sense of the ridiculous, not our sense of solitude, our solitude, a base for the actor to discover and from which to grow’ (Taylor, 1986).

At the end of the course, Lecoq demanded that we remain in a permanent state of discovery and remarked ‘all roads lead away from the school.’ We were not to simply codify and imitate his words and provocations. We were challenged to evolve our work. We were to brew the two years through our bodies and experiences and create a theatre that did not yet exist. Inspired, I came back to my movement position in a US professional actor training program, determined to apply what I had learned about physical theatre to a text-based program. I employed Lecoq’s process of ‘finding one’s own clown’ as the vehicle to prepare students to approach the character and create the play for Shakespeare’s clowns.
A mini memoir from the Lecoq School: from investigation to an understanding of what is funny

The first day of clown at the Lecoq School, we were asked to bring in a stunt, something physical that we would do before the rest of the class to 'make us laugh.' Of course, no one was funny. There was some embarrassed laughter, and some charity laughs, but no full-out belly laughter from the onlookers. Then one student, returning to his place, accidentally tripped and fell. The contorted flying body and his look of shock, surprise, and embarrassment sent the class into roars of laughter.

My classmates and I learned that the comic event had to look unplanned, in the moment, or have an element of surprise. The fear or confusion must be faithful to the actions of the event. The 'happy accident' was a moment of learning. We had to find honesty in ridiculousness. This discovery of how personal weakness can be transformed into dramatic strength was the key to my elaboration of a personal approach to clowning, involving a search for 'one's own clown', which became a fundamental principle of the training.

(Lecoq, 2000: 145)

Finding our own walk to create our clown's walk

The class had a chance to get up and imitate others in the room. Lecoq said, 'Who can be ____?' He then named one of the students. Everyone who wished was invited to jump up at the same time and walk and talk like that individual. Some students had only a few people attempt to imitate them, but when Lecoq turned toward me and said, 'Who wants to be Sara?' half of the class got up and started moving very quickly with jerky movements, speaking in gibberish with high-pitched voices. To me, they generally looked stupid. I was shocked and hurt because I thought I was considered adult and focused. I had no idea that I moved at 'warp speed' compared with most of the others in the class and that my quick, jerky movements and smile gave me the appearance of having a revolting, overly positive attitude. Devastated, I felt alone in the midst of a room full of laughing people. After a minute of self-pity, I got excited because I knew how to start to frame and embody my personal clown. The students were not trying to parody, ridicule, or insult me. My classmates were just re-creating, being what they saw. I now saw my clown walk – one I could push to extremes for comic value.

In that moment of self-pity, I also remembered and registered how I felt. I now could honestly re-create this physical moment of personal fragility at will.

Clown names

Days later in the clown-naming section, Lecoq gave me the moniker 'Taxi.' I had the ability to swing in and out of places quickly and speed to my destination. I was not of particularly high status, but my clown did not care because I could get to wherever I wanted to go. The name 'Taxi' defined me and gave me license to move fast and leave others in the dust. Lecoq warned us to resist getting too psychological as we launched into our personal clown-discovery improvisations.

The red nose allowed me to expose and theatrically use the side of me I thought others should not see. In my mind, I heard my father saying, 'Sara, some things are better left unsaid.' I remembered my second-grade teacher tying me to my chair because I would never stay seated. And I painfully remembered waving my hand to answer a question in third grade.
only to be called upon and find myself unable to frame the words. I remembered my body spasmodically attempting to act out the ideas to be understood. My history was a fount of valuable events to exploit for play. I remembered. And now I could play my fragility, my ridiculousness, my naivety, not as a child but as my clown, Taxi. Taxi was fast moving, happy, and optimistic, even when momentarily taken aback when ridiculed by another clown.

Cloaked in the safety of the smallest mask, the red nose, and sporting floppy pants complete with my Farm Bureau cap, a muscle shirt, clipboard, and whistle, my journey to find my clown continued.

**Taking Lecoq to a text-based school**

On returning home, using my experiences from the school and Lecoq’s words on ‘finding one’s own clown’ in *The Moving Body* (Lecoq, 2000: 143–150), I integrated clown into the final semester for senior BFA and MFA movement classes. Some of the exercises were verbatim, and some were adjusted to be applicable to the Shakespeare text that my students were studying in acting classes.

As with my own training, my students first studied acrobatics and the Twenty Movements; and they invented material in multiple improvisations as animals, using objects and props, and moved beyond to Commedia dell’arte. In the clown work, I asked the students, after trying to be funny and finding their walks, to show their greatest fears: acrophobia, claustrophobia, or perceived physical threats such as snakes or spiders. Then they moved beyond their fears to their joys and strengths, and pushed all to physical extremes for comic effect. Their clowns learned whether they succumbed to their greatest challenges or conquered them. They discovered the size of their reactions when faithful to the actions of the event. They could be big (flying uncontrollably in the air) or small (frozen in stillness with only the little finger shaking), but not in the middle. Lecoq would say, ‘Big is big, small is big, but the middle is small.’ If it was not specific, it was not dynamic.

After giving each clown a name, I assigned a highly physical duet clown act for a theatrical presentation in which one or both clowns attempted to work beyond their skills and failed. ‘Through his failure he reveals his profoundly human nature, which moves us and makes us laugh’ (Lecoq, 2000:146).

For the final *auto-cours* (a prepared improvisation based on the theme established by Lecoq and presented to the whole school at the end of the week), the clowns were put in families and asked to create an outing or escape together. In my classroom, Blankie, Ringston, Pricket, and De l’eau chose an *Escape from Clown Jail*. Exploiting their strengths and overcoming their fears, De l’eau, a self-acclaimed leader, was fearful but led the escape; Blankie used his security blanket to rappel a short wall; Pricket, carried by his cohorts, volunteered his services and broke down a wall with his helmeted head; and Ringston, with pride, used his colorful scarf as a parachute. They found out what their clowns would or would not do, together how easily they were offended, angered, or frightened, and their status in the group. The invention came with the need to solve a problem.

**Discovery process and tools gained to apply to Shakespeare’s clowns**

The students were not forced to expose themselves; they were provoked by the improvisation or the assigned theme of the *auto-cours* to reveal themselves. As the subjects of the investigations, the ‘side that seldom sees the light of day’ was revealed to each student in their play, pushed to extremes, and born anew in a liminal but loveable character. The provoking of
each other in play helped define each personal clown as they shared their fragility with the classmate clowns as partners, dupes, and audience. By watching the other clowns' reactions, they learned 'to observe the effect they produce on the world, that is to say their audience' (Lecoq, 2000: 149). As actors, they realized their own solitude, ridiculousness, and naïveté, but also witnessed and could appropriate multiple versions found in their classmates. They were obliged to break the fourth wall, look into the audience, and respond if provoked in any way. The audience was their public sounding board. ‘It is not possible to be a clown to an audience; you play with the audience’ (Lecoq, 2000: 147).

At the Lecoq School, through specific but not always easy-to-take comments from Lecoq and his teachers, we gained an understanding of what we were projecting visually to the audience – if we were showing a ‘profoundly human nature,’ if we clearly articulated Lecoq’s provocations and ‘told a story.’ We had to be able to answer these questions: ‘What are the stakes? What part of human nature is brought into play? What elements of human behavior and which bodies do they set in motion?’ (Lecoq, 2000: 99). And, introspectively but not narcissistically, what are the dramatic motors driving our clowns? If we were not successful, we understood that we must keep playing – always searching for the humanity, the events that told our stories, images, or the dynamics of our clown-world. Even if our choices ‘worked’ – if they made people laugh – we should continue the investigation, retaining and building on the successful moments.

**Similarities between personal clown and Shakespeare’s clown**

The designation of *clown* or *fool* by Shakespeare, like the red nose, gives each actor the permission to live in the play-world of the clown. Shakespeare’s clowns, like Lecoq’s personal clowns, have frailties, strengths, successes, and failures. They are not addenda to the script simply to do gags, tell stories, or perform pieces of physical business while the audience waited for the main event, although sometimes they did. They were not brought on just as comic relief, even though sometimes they were comic relief. In the plays, they were not personages such as a lord of misrule, festival fool transplanted from religious or seasonal festivals and touring troupes, or the Vice, even though sometimes the actors who played them refined their comedic skills at popular seasonal festivals, banquets, and court performances (Weimann & Bruster, 2008: 84–85). They spoke directly to the audience. They might have a great deal of physical play and comic business, but they played full-fledged characters, most with names that defined them on entering the stage to serve the storytelling.

**Definition of clown and fool**

There is a distinction between the fool and the clown in Shakespeare’s work. ‘Clown’ in Shakespeare’s playhouse is a theatrical term identifying the principal actor comedian in Shakespeare’s company: ‘the actor a company employed specifically to be its clown’ (Wiles, 1987: 61). Feste, Olivia’s fool (*Twelfth Night*); Touchstone, the fool in the court of Duke Frederick (*As You Like It*); and Lavatch, the fool for the Countess of Roussillon (*All’s Well That Ends Well*), are all listed in the *dramatis personae* as a clown, even though their occupation in the world of the play is that of a fool. The only character with a substantial role listed as a fool in the *dramatis personae* was Lear’s fool. The remaining characters described as a fool in the plays’ texts were listed as a ‘clown’ or ‘jester’ in the character breakdown.
The fool in Elizabethan England was brought into a large household or was present in court to cheer up, entertain, deliver messages or notes, or run errands for his master. As in Shakespeare, he might sing or play an instrument or offer a quip or witticism for a tip. More importantly, the fool was a purveyor of truth in his folly, using his wit to ridicule or spew didactic criticism. Allowed to speak his mind, the fool was predisposed to tell his master the truth and licensed by the court to speak with impunity. But as a court jester, he was an outsider, present in the court but not part of the court. Licensed to speak but not empowered to punish, even though usually spouting the soundest point of view in the room, a fool was never permitted to act on what he suggested as the best course of action or to change his own status in the play. He was, at once, in the play and outside of the play.

The simple, less intelligent clown I will call rustic, though he might be described as bondsman, clownish servant, bawd or pimp, swain, gravedigger, even constable or craftsman. He might be an artless, country bumpkin lacking education and urbanity; a simpleton; or an uncouth, boorish, unmannered workman or public servant. With ignorance and/or naiveté as their ally, rustics made bold comments. Like the fool, the rustic clown often stated the truth, but not due to cleverness. Rustics misunderstood what was said to them or did not have a grasp of the language or the clarity of thought to realize what they were saying. When a fool and rustic clown played in the same scene, the rustic was often ridiculed or duped by the fool. However, all – the clown, witty fool, or naïve rustic – often spoke by assuming impunity from punishment.

Rustics, like fools, lived on the margins of society and outside of the events of the plot; their past or current actions did not control the outcome of any play. After the neoclassical, Plautus-based *The Comedy of Errors*, all clowns spoke in prose, not verse, except in an occasional rhyming couplet just before leaving the scene. Prose made the clowns appear as if they were improvising – one of the skills of a professional clown. They were obliged to create specific, prescribed stage business dictated by the script to enhance the comedy. Even in ridiculous situations, their reactions had to be profoundly human and plausible for their characters. Their flawed but earnest reasoning, childlike wonderment, relationships with the lead characters, foibles, or crafted or accidental wit helped define the lead characters, endearing the clowns to the audiences while clarifying the intent of the humor for the high characters.

Feste wittily exposes Olivia’s foolishness concerning her extended grief over the loss of her brother in *Twelfth Night* (1.5.55–69). In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Dogberry’s conversation with Leonato becomes totally incomprehensible due to malapropisms and faulty communication skills, yet adds to the frustration of accusing Hero of unfaithfulness (3.5.1–82). His actions may not turn the plot, but they serve the storytelling.

Whether for rustic or witty fool, Shakespeare wrote text or created moments that implied fragility and sensitivity for his clowns. Launce weeps through his family story and criticizes his dog, Crab, for not commiserating with him in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (2.3.2), admitting ‘all the kind of the Launces have this very fault.’ In *The Tempest*, Trinculo is
devastated when accused and threatened by Stephano, when in fact it was Ariel who called Caliban a liar. ‘Why, what did I? I did nothing. I’ll go farther off’ (3.2.72–73). And in All’s Well That Ends Well, Lavatch laments his ‘Oh Lord Sir’ game when his fooling with the Countess goes awry (2.2.55–56). Clowns never admitted they were wrong, but they complained that they were wronged. Witty or ignorant, the clown often appeared onstage alone to address the audience about his situation. The audience was his friend, never his foe; and like the chorus, the clown often voiced the spectator’s point of view. Even while spewing faulty syllogisms, spouting opinions about the nature of lead characters, or outing natural fools, he believed the audience was either on his side or, at least, in agreement with his point of view.

Who played the clowns?

There is an abundance of evidence that Will Kemp, a full sharer in Lord Chamberlain’s Men with Shakespeare from 1594–99, followed by Robert Armin, played the star clown roles. There is no absolute documentation of the actors who originally played the Dromios in The Comedy of Errors or Grumio in The Taming of the Shrew, or many of the smaller clown roles. Writing and performing in theatres and at banquets, and touring in a variety of companies, both Kemp and Armin were already famous comedians who had shaped their physical idiosyncrasies, comedic and performance skills, and foibles to provoke laughter. They had parlayed their particular way of seeing the world – their personal politics, their wit, and ways of surviving life – their clowns – as entertainment.

Will Kemp was a big, physically dexterous man with an enormous presence, and by multiple sources is credited with playing the roles of Launce, Peter, Costard, Bottom, Launcelot Gobbo, and Dogberry. He was a dancer, a jig maker who developed, and in Shakespeare retained, the persona of the common man, rustic, coarse and ignorant with a cutting edge. Robert Armin played the household, court, or displaced/fired fool roles of Touchstone, Feste, Thersites, Lavatch, Pompe, Autolycus, and Gravedigger (Wiles, 1987: 151). Sporting a small, deformed physique, he had a strong skill set in physical play and imitation. A beautiful countertenor and witty ‘corrupter of words,’ he was more dexterous with language and song than with his body. He was an observer of life, and especially of real-life mentally deficient fools.

Personal clown to Shakespeare clown

Understanding the 16th century’s actor’s politics and playing skills can inform how the clown roles might have been played or clarify textual references to a clown’s stature. The historical research on the performance and physical attributes of the original player ultimately can be part of the 21st century actor’s own research and journey to the character. Nevertheless, I ask the actor to first access his or her clown within and apply his or her personal clown, his or her uniqueness, to the role, understanding he or she need not have the stature or physical skills of the actor who originated the role.

Three exercises to approach

1. The student actor must begin the journey to his or her Shakespearean clown by thinking and playing first as his or her personal clown. Shakespeare’s text provides a road map to decipher and devise the physical business embedded in a short piece of text.
**Gravediggers, Hamlet**

First Clown: Give me leave. Here lies the water; good. Here stands the man; good. If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he, nill he, he goes, mark you that. But if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life.

Second Clown: But is this law?

First Clown: Ay, marry, is't, crown'er's quest law. (5.1.15–22)

In the scene, the seasoned First Clown, while digging Ophelia’s grave, is trying to explain the law that forbids burial of one who commits suicide in a Christian grave. The dimmer Second Clown does not understand. In this moment, the First Gravedigger acts out or in some way shows the difference between being drowned by accident and drowning oneself.

In sets of partners, the class is required to mine the text for the meaning of the words, their location, and the status of the relationship to their partner. The partners must find the physical play in the same piece of text without fear of trying to be the specific clown in the text. (In my case, Taxi would take on the role of the First Clown. She would assume the role with all of her idiosyncrasies.) Like the personal clown, the Shakespeare clown ‘... needs no conflicts because he is in a permanent state of conflict, notably with himself’ (Lecoq, 2000: 147). The naïve rustic is ‘in a permanent state of conflict,’ so he struggles. Even the fool may hide his struggle, but the stakes are high; he could be fired or even hanged.

An investigation, not perfection in performance, is expected. I respond to the success at remaining their clown within and delivering the storytelling. As viewers, we might see that the struggle, in some cases holding their breath or jumping up and down, of the Second Clown to understand the ‘crown'er's quest law,’ and the frustration and anger of the First Clown for his lack of understanding, can heighten the comedy. Or the viewers might see if the moments of personal fragility shown by the Second Clown in his struggle to understand look honest, thus making the struggle and the actor as clown funny.

I assign a monologue that has much in common with an actor’s personal clown. Students are asked to honestly play all the moments that could be construed as fragility, sensitivity, or solitude.

Finally, I assign a full scene containing implied or embedded physical business. Shakespeare’s text is the prompt for creation of play/improvisation, and the students’ research on their clown character’s idiosyncrasies can be incorporated. The action must happen on the line, obeying the punctuation but not adding extra pauses. I want them to play everything play-able, exploiting every textual cue to find the physical action and humanity, and make the physical storytelling as clear as possible. I echo Lecoq, and ask them ‘to shape the scene for spectators using rhythm, tempo, space, form’ and yet stay open to possibilities, knowing that there is not just one right way, but also always another way to see.’

**Conclusion**

The Lecoq process of finding ‘one’s own clown’ reveals the actor’s human qualities and provides multiple opportunities for the actor to live in the play-world of the clown. With their frailties, strengths, successes, and failures revealed and harnessed to provoke laughter,
students can apply their funniness to a character at will – all without appearing to be working for laughs. From the response of the teacher and fellow students, they know what makes their clowns funny and, even in their failure, what makes them profoundly human to others: ‘the effect they produce on the world, that is to say, their audience. This gives them the experience of freedom of authenticity in front of an audience’ (Lecoq, 2000: 149).

Preparing a clown role in a Shakespeare play involves work beyond what I have outlined. But, once discovered, the personal clown can be mined as well as adapted for the creation of a Shakespearean clown. The actor is prepared to invent an ‘other side’ for the clown role he or she undertakes, not playing himself/herself, but using himself/herself.

References