

# CLAS



In LA's comedy scene, clowning is cool. Just don't expect big shoes and small cars – these jokers are ripping up the rule book, says Jessica Prupas

**PHOTOGRAPHS:  
WRAY SINCLAIR**

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Wednesday night in Silver Lake, Los Angeles, and I'm in a small, scruffy dance studio with a bunch of clowns. I watch as they writhe and wiggle on the floor, clamber on top of each other and drag one another across the room like human wheelbarrows, their feet makeshift levers. It's a chaotic scene, the only direction coming from John Gilkey, who occasionally bellows out instructions from the back of the room.

Gilkey is the founder and creative director of The Idiot Workshop and I'm watching one of their weekly rehearsals, where the clowns improvise surreal, slapstick "scenes" that may or may not make it into an end-of-the-year show. I say they're clowns, but none of them is wearing a red nose or oversized shoes: most are sporting an east LA uniform of vintage jeans, western boots and mulleted hair. They'd also probably bristle at being compared to the typical clown of film, TV and children's birthday parties.

"That kind of [clown] has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with what we're doing," Gilkey tells me when we meet at a nearby café that same evening. "Only in the term 'clown' is it connected to that. We're taking the word back."

Previous pages:  
Juzo Yoshida and  
Veronica Osorio



Gilkey and the performers in the room with me are part of a growing scene of LA-based comedians who wear the label "clown" as a badge of honour. The community is so established that it could be said to have spawned a new school of clowning, one that's as connected to the traditional techniques of *commedia dell'arte* as it is to modern sketch comedy and improv.

The scene's beginnings can mostly be traced back to when Gilkey began The Idiot Workshop in 2012. Before that, Gilkey had spent years performing with Cirque du Soleil as a clown and juggler. He moved to LA with the Canadian circus company for a resident show at the Dolby Theatre, but it was cancelled after a short run. Looking around the comedy scene at the time, Gilkey saw what he calls a "need".

"I felt that performances that I was seeing around town in stand-up and sketch were weak," he says, "[Improv comedy troupe] UCB was the biggest thing going. They have done incredible work... but they became talking heads. I felt there was a very limited performance happening."

So he established his own school of clowning and comedy, bringing in elements of sketch, stand-up and what he terms the "risk" of circus. Using "idiot" rather than "clown"

was intentional because, according to him, "clown was a real dirty word" at the time. Since then, the community has grown steadily; now it's a major force in LA's comedy scene, having produced several popular performance troupes (Clown Zoo, Clown Church and others), rival physical-theatre schools like The Clown School, and rising celebrities like Natalie Palamides.

Most of the scene centres around The Elysian. On the edge of trendy Echo Park, also in east LA, the nonprofit theatre hosts regular clown shows and acts as an incubator for the city's most exciting, boundary-pushing comedy (stand-up comedian Jacqueline Novak's acclaimed Netflix special, *Get On Your Knees*, began life here, for instance).





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It's where I go to catch Play Space, a weekly “clown jam” organised by performers Will Duncan, Rachel Ho and Paul Schlesinger. Founded in 2022, it has become a free-form, judgement-free space where members of the community can play, workshop new ideas and connect with fellow clowns.

I meet Schlesinger and Ho before one of Play Space's weekly meet-ups. The building – low-slung and nestled into a hillside – was erected around 1927 as a cinema, and its original marquee still lights up the LA night. I find a place to sit among the clutter of the theatre's green room and ask the two performers how they found their way into this niche but growing community.

“I used to do stand-up, and I moved to LA about the same time that I decided to quit [that],” Schlesinger tells me. “And

then I saw Natalie Palamides perform... and it just kind of blew my mind.”

For Schlesinger, the key difference between those clown shows and other forms of live comedy he'd seen was the role of the audience. What he saw was a medium that put the spectators and the performer on a level playing field. In his words, “The audience is usually of equal importance to the performer.”

It's what drew Ho to the medium as well. Dressed in head-to-toe black and cutting more of an art-school figure to Schlesinger's slouchy T-shirt and jeans, she tells me that, after spending years as

*From left: Los Angeles' Elysian theatre, John Gilkey and two clowns practising at The Idiot Workshop (inset)*



a performance artist, she was captivated by clowning because it often removes the fourth wall that separates those onstage from those in seats. “I [was interested in using] audience participation from the theatrical point of view, and I discovered that clowning is basically entirely that as an art form,” she says.

It begs a philosophical question – can you clown without an audience present? Schlesinger’s answer is definitive: “No.” In fact, he attributes the close-knit feel of the community to this special relationship between audience and performer. “The community feels like they participate in the creation of stuff and that’s contributed to how it’s blown up.”

Later, sitting in one of the red-velvet seats of the auditorium, I see this community come to life. This week’s Play Space is bursting at the seams – most of the

*From above, left-right: Clown practice; Rachel Ho and Paul Schlesinger; clown-related graffiti in the theatre and Juzo Yoshida*

theatre’s 97 seats are filled with eager, smiling clowns, many of whom appear to be friends. Each attendee is given two minutes to perform a “scene” onstage – some are prerehearsed fragments of physical comedy that could be incorporated into a longer performance; others are improvised and totally anarchic (one clown dances wildly across the stage in a tutu to ...*Baby One More Time*). No matter what we see onstage, though, the crowd always whoops and cheers.

The clowns attending Play Space tonight appear to skew young, mostly in their twenties and early thirties. The scene is so established that these clowns can be said to comprise a “second wave” of clowning in LA – Gilkey and his cohorts being the first. I meet one of Gilkey’s contemporaries, Juzo Yoshida, in Little Tokyo, a neighbourhood near downtown LA that’s long been home to the city’s Japanese community. Its pedestrianised streets are lined with *kawaii* gift shops – their hipped roofs made of the classic *kawara* tiles of Japanese temples – and festooned with lanterns.

I spot Yoshida right away – he stands out from the crowd in a glittery gold jumpsuit, bow tie and newsboy cap. We take a seat outside Nijiya Market, a supermarket stocking

hard-to-find products imported from Japan. Yoshida tells me that, like many clowns, he started out in the improv world, performing with UCB. Paola Coletto – an esteemed clown teacher who trained at the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq, the classical French school of mime and physical theatre – rolled into town, and Yoshida signed up for some of her classes. He was hooked and soon joined Clown Zoo.

Yoshida tells me that he would bring some of his classic clown training into his performances with the troupe. He says that he would play the “calm, gentle” foil to the other, more “aggressive” members of Clown Zoo, who were influenced by Gilkey’s renegade clowning style, which preaches a more confrontational relationship with the audience. “Gilkey’s method is really out there,” he says. “He’s great at what he does. It’s fun, and sometimes outrageous stuff is entertaining. It’s just not my thing.”

Instead, Yoshida says he likes to “share his view with the audience” and “be a little stupid”. “Being stupid is a compliment in the clown world.” He tells me that the interplay between the more combative clowning style of his contemporaries and his gentler disposition nodded to a classic clowning dynamic that has been utilised for decades, going back to the circus clowns



of 19th-century Europe. “The other, more aggressive style is not the opposite [to what I do]. It’s not a separation of the two, but more like a combination of the two.”

Gilkey’s method is so widespread and influential in LA that one could draw parallels with the freewheeling community that revolved around master clown Philippe Gaulier in 1960s France – LA’s clown scene feels like an inflection point in the

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long history of clowning, with its own distinct philosophy and praxis. “I want to divide the audience,” Gilkey tells me. “I want to give the audience a full spectrum, not just laughter. I want them to feel deeply.”

With his shock of grey hair and John Lennon glasses, Gilkey looks the part of the eccentric artist. Sitting across from me at a coffee shop, he opines about his personal philosophy of clowning, telling me that he rejects the notion that the clown must always make the audience happy. He says that his performances can contain long bouts of drama, or of silence – in his words, “dangerous” moments that force the audience to engage more fully with what’s onstage.

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it's a very visceral experience for the performers and the audience."

But I've yet to really see a proper clown show, so I head to the Lyric Hyperion. The nonprofit which runs The Elysian has its roots here, so there is a lot of cross-pollination between the two theatres. Tonight, Veronica Osorio is performing; an actor and clown from Venezuela, she has agreed to meet me before her show, called *Medicine Woman*.

Osario tells me she studied clowning and *commedia dell'arte* techniques in her native country before emigrating to the US. She says that she "didn't know what to do" with her clown training when she arrived in the States, until she discovered the burgeoning scene in LA. She took classes at The Idiot Workshop and made her way into the community.

"It felt more amorphous," she says, comparing the philosophy of LA's modern clown scene to her stricter, more rigorous training. "Sort of like a playful thing with no specific goal."

She incorporates that feeling of play into her performances, in which she plays various characters, including a Venezuelan shamanic healer who administers "treatments" to the audience members. In sum: "It's poetic and dumb."



From above: Veronica Osorio performing – and getting into character backstage

Later, I take a seat in the small auditorium. It's full, partially with people I recognise from Play Space the other day. Osorio emerges onstage in her folkloric costume – white, frilly, red-trimmed dress and matching headpiece – and picks out audience members one by one, cleansing them of their "bad" energies by writhing wildly around them, occasionally ending up on their lap. Later in the show there are a few Gilkeyan moments when Osorio drops her shaman mask to talk about her experiences as an immigrant in the US and being robbed at gunpoint in Venezuela – before diffusing the tension with an expertly timed joke.

It all recalls something Gilkey said earlier, "I want credible moments of beauty and to touch the audience, to surprise them." Here in a tiny theatre in east LA, I'm moved by a clown.

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### ACTING FUNNY

FOUR STARS WHO HAVE DABBLED IN CLOWNING

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#### SACHA BARON COHEN

Borat himself trained under Philippe Gaulier. Baron Cohen told Seth Meyers that the clowning master would sometimes make his students cry.

#### WILL FERRELL

The comedian also trained under Gaulier, who is known to insult his students. "You are a very good clown for my grandmother," he told one.

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#### TOBY JONES

The British character actor spent three years under Lecoq's tutelage learning methods like mimodynamics, which combines mime with spoken word.

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#### EDDIE REDMAYNE

In a bid to shake off his actorly tics, Eddie Redmayne told *GQ* that he took courses at the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq.