

Clowning around



for a good purpose

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Colourful costumes, exaggerated make-up, comical movements and amusing tricks – all these things compound a strange being we call “clown”. Not just simply entertaining the general public, some people are clowning around with a special purpose to deliver joy to people in need, and also to themselves.

Clown doctors are volunteers who visit children in hospital once a week, aiming to relieve their fear of drugs and medical treatment. They are not medical professionals but unpaid volunteers who wish to bring joy to children with illnesses.

Unlike ordinary clowns, clown doctors do not wear colourful outfits. Combining the image of clowns and doctors, they put on white doctor gowns decorated with eye-catching patterns. Instead of a magic wand, clown doctors meet the children with toy stethoscopes and syringes, as well as balloons to be twisted into shapes of different animals.

“We not only aim to ease their suffering by bringing them laughter, but also let them understand that medicines and treatments are good for them,” said Choi Wai-wong, who had been a clown doctor in Hong Kong for eight years.

Choi, who is known as Dr Amy to her audiences, squeezes out half a day every week from her job as a social worker for the unpaid visit. She meets kids in children’s wards on one-to-one basis, each for five to 10 minutes, so as to develop an intimate and interactive relationship with the kids.

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By playing games and chatting with the children, clown doctors offer a welcome respite from the medical routine. “Every visit is like a date with the kids,” Dr Amy said with a smile. “We want them to feel that they are being cared and valued by someone.” She is most satisfied when the kids laugh happily during the visit.

Supported by the Theodora Foundation from Switzerland, clown doctors were first introduced in Hong Kong in 1996, with the Queen Mary Hospital being the first hospital to try the scheme.

There are currently six clown doctors in Hong Kong, all of whom have passed interviews and personality tests before they started their unpaid work. A 16-week training course is also provided for the clown-doctors-to-be to acquire knowledge about children’s diseases and psychology, as well as how to play magic tricks, perform puppetry and twist balloons.

With the same goal of bringing happiness to the others, members from the Kei Fai Elderly Clown Team also like to entertain, by performing simple magic tricks and twisting balloons.

Established in 2004, the group is the first elderly clown team in Hong Kong. Aged between 67 and 80 years old, all of the 10 volunteers come from Po Leung Kuk Wong Yau Cheung Memorial Neighbourhood Elderly Centre.

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- 1: Choi Wai-wong (Dr Amy) is putting on a clown doctor's make-up.
- 2: Dr amy with her funny mask.
- 3: The back of Dr Amy's "doctor gown", with her name on it.

- 4: Dr Amy is tying up her hair to prepare for the clown doctor's look.
- 5: Balloon-twisting is one of the tricks that Dr Amy uses to entertain.
- 6: Dr Amy offers the children a welcome respite from the medical routine.

The group has been invited to spread joy to different places, including Yuen Long and Wong Tai Sin. Putting on loose, colourful outfits before every show, the aged performers can easily grab the audiences' attention. To complete their comical appearances with a finishing touch, the elderly spend one to two hours more putting on their individualised make-up.

Using their faces as palettes, the elderly draw hearts on their noses and flowers on their faces with a steady hand. "First, you put on the white base colour. Then you apply the red colour, one colour at a time," said Fung Hang, the oldest clown in the team, as he explained the delicate procedures to achieve a multi-coloured face.

The 80-year-old team member admitted that they only know simple and common tricks that the audiences may have already seen in other shows. Yet, performing glamorous magic tricks is not the goal of the elderly clown team. Rather, delivering happiness is.

"When we perform, we feel the joy of the audiences, and thus we are happy as well," said Fung, laughing. Although magic tricks are not their main skill, their wrinkled hands can twist long colourful balloons into various shapes including hats, flowers, swords, dogs and turtles.

Despite the volunteers' age, they do not act it during the performances.



1: All of the elderly clowns have their own make-up boxes.
 2: The voluntary clowns are busy with their make-ups.
 3: Colourful wigs of the clowns.
 4: Poon Yiu-man, 70, concentrates on her comical make-up.

“After joining the team, I feel much more energetic and mentally younger, because I have met many new friends and I can play with the kids,” said Yee Jang-too, a 76-year-old member of the team.

To Yee, his role as a clown makes the interaction between the audiences and him a natural and joyful one. “After putting on a costume and make-up, I take up the role as a clown,” Yee explained. “Even though the audiences do not know me, they are happy when we perform. The interaction is natural.”

Similar to Kei Fai Elderly Clown Team, a group of clowns from Caritas Lok Hang Workshop also disperse glee to the others by clowning around. Instead of aged performers, the group consists of young members ranging from 20 to 40 years old, all of whom are mildly or moderately intellectually disabled.

Unlike ordinary clowns who perform magic tricks to entertain, members of the Caritas Lok Hang Dance Group amuse their spectators by dancing in colourful clown costumes. Modern dance, jazz, and hip hop are some of the movements they like.

Putting on multi-coloured clown outfits, warming-up and dancing with hip hop music, the dance group performed just like any other group of entertainers.

Their talents in dancing were recognised when they danced spontaneously to music 10 years ago. “They have the ability to perform. Yet, there were no opportunities. The team was set up to provide them with just such an opportunity,” Story





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5-8:
Eighty-year-old Fung Hang (5), 83-year-old Lam Yuk-chun (6), 67-year-old Chan Kwok-chun (7) and 70-year-old Poon Yiu-man (8) all enjoy their roles as a clown.
9: The elderly clowns can perform simple magic like balloon twisting.



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- 1: Chak Chi-chung, one of the performers of Caritas Lok Hang Dance Group, stretches his legs before dancing.
- 2: While another performer Kwong Ming-hong performs break dance, each dancing clown of the group also has their unique dancing style.
- 3-5: Yiu Yan-wah (3), Mok Shuk-ying (4) and Tong Chi-ming (5) express themselves with different parts of the body.



Fung Shuk-ching, the dance group's founder, explained.

Besides leading the dance team, Fung and other volunteers also help the performers apply make-up on their faces, as the group members have not learnt any make-up techniques yet, and that putting on clown make-up is not an easy task.

Rico Kwok Cheung-ah, the 27-year-old choreographer of the group, said it was hard to communicate with members of the group in the beginning, as they all have a certain level of mental disability. "You need to use simple words or examples to explain to them," he said.

But very soon Kwok was amazed by their talent in dancing, and thus





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he tailor-made solo sections for the clowns to highlight their specialties.

“Each of them has a different dancing style. So I add or eliminate some steps to make their movements smoother. It’s worth bringing their potential to full play,” said Kwok, who had been their dance tutor for three years. The choreographer sometimes gets involved in performances, to promote the message of social integration.

The dancing clowns do not only bring pleasure to audiences, but they also get personal benefits from performances and weekly practices. Dancing can enhance the coordinations of their bodies, and assist in their personal growth to


become more communicative and self-confident individuals.

“I feel happy when I dress up as a clown. After performing a clown dance, I do not only lose weight, but have also become smarter, healthier and more talkative,” said Tong Chi-ming, a 40-year-old performer in the group.

“I become a happier person after joining the dance group, because I can make new friends and entertain people,” said Tsui Wai-kin, a 26-year-old member who mentioned “I am really happy” four times during the interview.

The dance group has been invited to perform on various occasions, like the 40th Hong Kong

Brands and Products Expo and an activity promoting the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games.

Coming together for different purposes, all these performers have put in much effort to become a clown. However, they all have one thing in common – the reward of seeing the smiling faces and laughter of their audiences. 



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6-8: Team members of the Caritas Lok Hang Dance Group are happy when posing for photographs.



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