

Clowner utan Gränser Sverige grundades 1996 av artisten Nalle Laanela. I sin bok "The Clown Manifesto" berättar han om hur allting började.

Chapter three - "The more trauma one has experienced, the bigger the need to laugh."

Confessions of a War Clown. A story from Sarajevo.

In the beginning of my clowning career a lot of the important ideas and philosophies in the field seemed to have derived from Jacques Lecoq, so I decided to attend his school in Paris. Just as interesting as Lecoq's theories was meeting and playing with like-minded performers from all over the world. There I met a quirky English magician, Bertie. We would sit up all night drinking red wine and practising the arts of magic, ventriloquism and pick-pocketing.

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We developed a duo show which on the weekends we performed outside the Pompidou Centre, mixing magic tricks with slapstick routines. We never were very successful at making money, but it ignited my love for performing in the street. So, when the Easter holiday arrived in 1996 and I had two weeks with nothing to do, the idea to travel to Sarajevo to do street shows emerged. Peace had just arrived with Carl Bildt's peace talks and the Dayton Agreement.

I took the train to Croatia but had to switch to a bus for the last section of the journey as the railway tracks were destroyed from the bombings. The bus trip was bizarre, the scenery a mixture of ex-Yugoslavia's amazing and varied landscape combined with blasted houses and villages.

We arrived in Sarajevo via a great highway, lined with stately high-rise office buildings, riddled with holes like Swiss cheese, surrounded by barbed wire and UN military vehicles. The first problem came up when I went to buy a city map. My US dollars were totally useless, the man at the kiosk just shook his head. I had exchanged my entire travel funds into US dollars, but soon realised only Deutschmarks were accepted. Hungry and anxious, I walked into town, hoping to find a bank or currency exchange bureau. It seems these always exist, even at wartime. I found three banks, but all were closed for the weekend. Famished by now, and with a slightly growing concern, I was advised by a passerby to ask the American Embassy if I could exchange the money there.

When I finally found the embassy at the edge of town, easily recognisable by the ugly architecture, extremely militarised security zone around it and the winding queue of people in front of it, I was rebuffed by the soldier guards. Go find a bank!

Dejected, I sat on the grass across the road and felt the concern was not so small anymore. The sun was going down and, as the air gradually became colder, I felt terribly alone in the world. From the corner of my eye I saw a passing jeep with a 'Doctors Without Borders' logo on it. For some reason I started running after the car.

Luckily, it turned off the main road into smaller streets which made it possible for me to almost catch up with it. But with my big backpack and my suitcase full of juggling props, magic tricks and clown costume, I lost sight of the car after about ten blocks. Fortunately, I soon found it again, parked outside the 'Doctors Without Borders' offices. I ran up the stairs into the building and when I breathlessly told my whole story to the woman behind the desk, she cheerfully replied, 'A clown! Oh what fun! I know exactly who needs you.'

A phone call later I had an address and a street map from her and from there I went to the youngest NGO I have ever encountered: 'Phoenix'.

'Phoenix' consisted of a group of 16-year-old girls who for years had provided the little bit of aid that had managed to get through the Serbs' encirclement for the schools, kindergartens and children who needed it.

In war, you grow old quickly. My estimate is that experiencing one war year is equivalent to three ordinary years. A ten-year-old who has survived three years of war thus has the emotional maturity of about a nineteen-year-old.

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Three years before, when these thirteen-year-old girls noticed how the international NGO's lack of local knowledge meant that assistance wavered, they took matters into their own hands and created 'Phoenix', an organisation which served as a main link between international NGOs and Sarajevo's children.

In the last year of the war, one of the girls had managed to smuggle herself out of the country and now went to college in the United States. I stayed in her room, her parents became mine and this became my virgin tour as a war clown.

During one of my first shows in Sarajevo in the old neighbourhood, my show was hijacked by a bunch of Spaniards. I had to let them join in because they were funnier than I was. After the show, they said they called themselves 'Payasos Sin Fronteras', Clowns Without Borders.

The penny dropped: I love travelling, I love meeting people and I love to perform. What a great idea. So when I returned to Sweden I gathered some artist friends and we formed Clowns Without Borders – Sweden. We started our first office in the mail room at the theatre in which I was working, and all these years later we're still here (different premises though), working with the largest international aid organisations focused on culture-based psycho-social rehabilitation projects.