

AS A YOUNG woman in Mexico City, Gaby Muñoz, a 43-year-old performer known onstage as Chula the Clown, recalls, putting on makeup with her friends was always a fraught experience. “There was this whole idea of how to be a woman. They had this beautiful hair and these divine bodies, and I would look in the mirror and think, ‘Well, I guess not in this life.’ That made me laugh,” she says. As Chula — her round face washed white, her lips a tiny red heart, her eyebrows painted into inquisitive asymmetry — Muñoz, who this spring will begin touring through Europe and Central and South America, has played a jilted bride and a doddering old lady. She’s used her open, expressive face and antic physicality to joke wordlessly about loss, aging in a woman’s body and other concepts that have long been overlooked in the male-dominated world of clowns. For Muñoz, laughter isn’t an end in itself but rather, she says, “a way to connect.”

Clowns, jesters, harlequins and fools have, of course, played a similar role throughout history. In ancient Greece, they served as ribald choristers in epic dramas, while emperors in Han dynasty China delighted in the buffoonish exertions of the court *paiyou*. Shakespeare’s world-weary wags spoke truth to King Lear and other royals, while the *heyoka*, the holy fool of many Sioux tribes, inverted day-to-day logic to provoke healing

laughter. The emblematic sad clown that we know today evolved from the melancholic, talc-dusted Pedrolino of 16th-century Italian commedia dell'arte, while the contemporary circus clown, with his exaggerated face paint and physical wit, debuted on a London stage around 1800. (The one dressed in an ill-fitting suit and oversize shoes emerged as his clumsy foil seven decades later.) Though ritually and physically distinct, clowns have always been, as the heyoka John Fire Lane Deer writes with Richard Erdoes in their 1972 book, "Lame Deer Seeker of Visions," "sacred, funny, powerful, ridiculous, holy, shameful, visionary." They were also almost always men.

During her childhood in Estonia, the 29-year-old London-based clown Julia Masli dreamed of acting in tragedies for exactly that reason: comedy, she assumed, was a man's game. When, in 2017, she watched the legendary English clown Lucy Hopkins perform in Brighton for the first time, "seeing a woman do something so absurd and free felt like a revolution," she says. In Masli's show "Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha," which debuted at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2023 and has since toured internationally, she appears onstage as a doe-eyed Victorian vagabond who asks audience members to share their problems. As she offers solutions both genuine and absurd — enlisting a bored office

worker to record the show's minutes; duct-taping a lonely young woman to a group of strangers onstage — she transforms the emotional labor so often foisted on women into a source of laughter and catharsis.

OTHER RISING FEMALE clowns, like the 26-year-old English actress Frankie Thompson and the 32-year-old Swiss Mexican theater artist Paulina Lenoir, use womanhood itself as a source of humor. In the former's "Body Show," performed with her collaborator the 29-year-old trans masculine anarchist clown Liv Ello, Thompson forgoes exaggerated makeup and costume, combining lip-syncing and confrontational *bouffon* (an approach to clowning that emphasizes absurdity and shock) to discuss her history with anorexia. Small and blond — "people treat me like this tiny-angel special little bird to be protected," she says — Thompson makes herself grotesque by, say, licking the stage or choking down Marmite, eliciting laughter that implicates the audience in the humiliations of body dysmorphia. Meanwhile, Lenoir's persona Puella Eterna feminizes the physical exaggeration of the classic male clown by wearing a corset, a flamenco skirt and a giant Minnie Mouse bow in lieu of a bulging nose. As master of ceremonies at her Fool's Moon cabaret, Puella displays the kind of unearned self-assurance that usually wins praise for men and scorn for women.

