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**Le Rire Médecin (the laughter doctors) on a wire
or how a work of fiction can spring from reality**

**[Le Rire Médecin (i dottori della risata) su un filo
o come un'opera di finzione può nascere dalla realtà]**

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Le Rire Médecin

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Letter to Editors

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I founded the Le Rire Médecin, a non-for-profit organization in 1991 in France and was one of the first “healthcare clowns” in “The Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit” from 1988-1991. The Rire Médecin now employs over 150 professional performing artists who make over 100,000 individualized pediatric hospital visits per year all over the country.

In 2022 a full feature film, written and directed by a well-known French actor, Reda Kateb was created. It is called SUR UN FIL (On a Wire). Freely adapted from a book that I wrote in 1999 with Dr. Bernie Warren, “Le Journal du Docteur Girafe”, (The Clown Doctor Chronicles), it follows the initiatory journey of Jo (Aloïse Sauvage), a young acrobat who suffers a fall and must reinvent herself quickly. Urged on by her street-theatre partner, Gilles (Philippe Rebbot) who intervenes regularly as a clown in a hospital, she joins the “Nez Pour Rire”, where she is welcomed by the duo Gilles, aka Poireau (Philippe Rebbot) and his accomplice Thierry, aka Roger Chips (Jean-Philippe Buzaud). With no experience in the field, Jo creates her clown character Zouzou, while she must learn to find her way between her growing attachment to the children and the challenging situations she faces. It is a human adventure that will slowly reveal her to herself..

Back when I received an unexpected call from Reda Kateb who expressed interest in our work, I had no idea that I would embark upon a 4-year journey from start to finish. We initially met for a 15-minute Ethiopian coffee and ended up 3 hours later wondering where the time had gone and exchanging recipes for Sicilian caponata. He avoided expressing any intention to create a film.

So, I challenged Reda to spend a day discreetly observing a clown duo in one of our hospitals and to call me afterwards. He was deeply moved by everything he saw and overwhelmed by his own carnival

of feelings. When he was a child and teenager his mother had been a full-time nurse, and he realized how deeply she had transmitted the love of her work to him. He experienced the shock of going from one hospital room where the child was giddy with laughter watching the clowns to another where they strummed an African lullaby on the ukelele for an infant to help him sleep in the arms of an exhausted mother to a quiet room where a beautiful, teenage girl was in the last stages of her illness. In this room they simply sang her favorite Swiftie songs as she silently grew angel wings. After this intense day, Reda could imagine the potential of writing a full-length film. He called me with passion in his voice and the determination to learn more so that a film could immerge. He went on to observe another dozen times and attended many of our training and casting sessions.

With his co-scenarist, Fadette Drouard and myself as a consultant, he spent the next two years writing and rewriting the script. Lockdown in France had some advantages, we could concentrate! My role was to infuse the two authors with my bi-weekly stories after performing in a hematology ward and to let them know when the dialogue sounded artificial. Mainly when the artists or hospitalized children “spoke”.

After the pandemic lockdown was over, I scheduled the two main actor-clowns to observe a dozen times each, full immersion in our pediatric hospitals. My instructions to them were: “disguise yourself as a wall...or a door.” One of our own artist-clowns, Jean Philippe Buzaud (Roger Chips) was cast as the other main character for film’s clown trio, and they also were allowed to perform in their film costumes with him three times IN THE HOSPITAL with real sick kids and right before the filming began. Aloise and Philippe took these opportunities seriously and were exposed to “our life” in the hospitals as we have experienced it for the last 30 odd years. For better or for worse. It certainly helped them come close to the authentic emotions we, “real” clown doctors, experience when we work.

Aloise and Philippe also endured a week in a clown workshop and had a coach from Le Rire Medecin present on the shoot each day to help finesse their scenes.

Fadette (co-writer), the make-up artist, the head costume designer, set decorator, prop master, director of photography, sound mixer - all were asked to spend a day observing our work in a pediatric ward. And the same treatment for Elsa Wollaston who played me as the founder-director of the organisation.

I helped the costume designer with the concept of outfitting the clowns and took the sound designer to the hospital to scout out authentic noise in the cafeteria, the waiting rooms, the nurses lounge etc. We baptised the hospital after Pr Jean Lemerle, the first head of pediatric oncology to open his doors to us in 1991. In the group scenes that show how hospital healthcare artists are trained, the casting director exclusively used Le Rire Medecin’s clowns.

The film came out on October 30th 2024 in all of France to 90% positive reviews. We managed to avoid melodramatic scenes and showed the world that our work was professional, delicate, usually funny and humanly skilled. As we toured France for 5 weeks for avant -premieres, it was important to remind the spectators that this was a work of fiction and NOT a documentary. There were as many questions about our profession as there were for the director, Reda that were centered on the casting choices and about working with child actors.

In conclusion, this film was an amazing instrument for communication and even fundraising: in 2 hours one could actually understand the fine points of our profession whereas I have been rowing upstream with a strong wind for the last 33 years! Hats off to Reda Kateb, Pyramide and Universal films.

<https://youtu.be/vaGgAOJCKRg?si=lydN4YQWskLm4xsS>

Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Bionotes

Caroline Simonds

With a grant from the French government, Caroline founded “Le Rire Medecin” in 1991, the first group of its kind in Europe. As of today, “Le Rire Medecin” is present in 20 hospitals and employs 152 trained, healthcare artist-clowns. She has received three of France’s prestigious awards: Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres - June 2001; Officier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres- April 2012 and Officier de l’Ordre National du Mérite - December 2020.