



## 'To be silly is quite an art': the weekend I became a mime artist



*Our writer, Kate Wyver, joins the popular mime workshop given by Nola Rae.*

Early on in mime class, I hit a 'brick wall'. It's about two metres high and the width of my outstretched arms, but you can still see my shiny, red-faced embarrassment through it. 'First, pretend you hate the wall,' internationally renowned mime artist, Nola Rae prompts, as we scratch and hit at the air, 'and now you love the wall.' We stroke the imaginary bricks lovingly and I wonder if I'm secretly being filmed. I wave my arms awkwardly in a caress, wondering how much shame I'm willing to wade through. 'It is the most beautiful wall you have *never* seen.'

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Rae is a co-founder of London International Mime Festival. Originally a dancer, she trained with the great mime artist Marcel Marceau in Paris. I've joined the 70-year-old Australian performer's coveted two-day workshop at the festival to attempt to learn her art. 'A mime artist,' Rae explains, 'is an illusionist. We grab things out of the air. We make our audience see what isn't there.' Over the weekend, she teaches us the skills of rhythm, movement and articulation. We become monsters, spiders, misers and flies. We bob and crouch and hop as she relays to us snippets of the history of mime through Marceau and a popular form of theatre called *commedia dell'arte*.

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There are 24 of us on the course, which is booked up a year in advance. The group includes a clown, a comedy double-act and drama-school students. They all carry themselves with such confidence. Their exaggerated movements seem to flow effortlessly through their joints and fingertips, while I'm trapped inside my head panicking about how awkward I feel. 'Don't worry about feeling stupid or making mistakes,' Rae advises. 'That's how you learn.' And yet, the worry lingers.

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For comfort, I cling to the few others who have little experience in performing on stage. There's a young woman who has never acted but wanted to give mime a go, and a retired office worker who has been going to the mime festival for years and thought it would be fun. Then I'm paired up with 10-year-old Eva. An all-round fan of stories (her cat is named Crookshanks after the one in the Harry Potter books), Eva didn't realise the class would be full of adults when she signed up but doesn't seem the slightest bit intimidated.

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A brilliant performer with a particular eye for timing, Eva takes the biggest risks and builds the wildest inventions, encouraging the rest of us to be ever more playful with our actions. We're partnered up for an exercise where we have to mirror each other while crossing the room to meet in the middle as if greeting a long lost friend, only to meet, realise it's the wrong person, and waddle away. When it's our turn, Eva happily leads with no holding back. We fling our arms and legs around and jump like deer; at this point, she makes me laugh so hard I have to catch my breath before I can copy her, rasping like a wildcat and wobbling like jelly. When we cross in the centre she makes me walk like a crab across the whole length of the space back to the

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starting line. I can't stop grinning. Finally, rid of my stifling embarrassment, I start to get to grips with the task. Look through the bright eyes of an eager, intelligent child, and mime is all about play.

Mime doesn't have to mean a showy individual in a black-and-white stripy top with a whitened, sorrowful face, stuck in an imaginary box (though I can now very effectively push away a heavy invisible box, should the need arise). Instead, mime makes us focus on the little things: eye contact, touch, individual movements. While it can come across as a highly pretentious art form – particularly, Rae says, 'if you take yourself too seriously' – mime celebrates the skill of playfulness. 'To be silly is quite an art,' she adds. To mime is to play a game and stick to the imaginary, wondrously childish rules as well as you can. It is someone falling over for comic effect for the pleasure of making others laugh. It is the skill of telling a good story, eyes wide open and lips sealed. 40 45

Mime, I have learned, is the art of paying close attention to the minor details. At least, that's what I think it's all about, sweaty and aching as I leap over a brick wall, pick up a heavy suitcase, slip on a puddle of water and wallop into a tree on my way out. 50

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