

# Arts & Entertainment



Steve Kidd/Western News

**LAYNE RICHARDSON** (above) takes part in an exercise on picking up emotional and physical cues. While Holly Adams watches and encourages (right), Richardson tries to respond to what Melanie Girard is trying to communicate with her actions.



## Clowning around

### High school students learn an ancient craft for use in modern therapy.

STEVE KIDD  
Western News

When you mention the movie *Patch Adams* to Holly Adams, the answer is one she's clearly given many times.

"Yes, he's my friend and no, we're not related," she said. But like Dr. Hunter "Patch" Adams, who was a pioneer in clown care, or clown therapy, Holly Adams has a firm belief in the power of humour and theatre to aid the healing process.

For the last week, Adams has been in Penticton offering a series of workshops to high school students interested in learning about her work. Eventually, the students will be putting their new skills into practice, working with patients suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia.

But for now, Adams is putting them through what she describes as exercises you might find in any acting class, along with many directed at reading body language and emotions.

"You have to feel the heartbeat of the group," she told them, during one exercise where the students were learning to feel how others in the group were moving.

"Clowning, all over the world, is many, many things. But the clown is always the one with their finger on the pulse, but the clown is always the one that is the most tuned in to what is happening. The most tuned in to the individual, to society," said Adams.

"In terms of the culture, it's the clown's job to reveal how incredibly ridiculous we are, how beautiful we can be, how crazy something is. That requires a heightened level of awareness about everything at all moments."

Holly said that people are recognizing the positive effect that

clown therapy can have on the healing process.

"It gets more used in the hospitals now than it did when that movie (*Patch Adams*) came out," she said. "More and more studies show that different kinds of clowning techniques can contribute to the healing process."

In terms of working with Alzheimer's and dementia patients, that means a couple of things. The antics and humour of the clowns provides beneficial stimulation, but Adams said the job of the clown goes much deeper.

"Your job is to be a portal, to provide some light but also be a vessel for sorrow," she said, pointing out that not everyone on the road of a mind that is changing is in a place of complete unawareness. "It's a longterm process. When that's happening to you that's terrifying, but because you are the mom, the grandmother, you can't tell your children I'm afraid, I don't understand."

Many people don't want to burden their children with their fears and sadness, Adams thinks.

"So then who do they talk to? Who do they share that with? That's something we can do, we're there," she said.

"If what you want is to reach out and take care of other people, then you are focusing on something beyond and you go through what you have to, to get to that place. These kids are amazing in many ways. One of them is their honest, real commitment to helping someone else."

But along with developing their external skills, the students are experiencing inner growth as well and at a rapid rate, something that pleases Sandra Richardson, vice-principal at Penticton Secondary. Richardson, along with Summerland Secondary teacher Linda Beaven, arranged



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**HOLLY ADAMS** helps Jade Ganie (above) with her clown costume. Ganie jokes that being a clown is helping her get over her fear of clowns.

for Adams to come out from New York to deliver the workshops.

"They made comments in here that this feels like a family," said Richardson. "In three, four sessions, that's the intensity of the work that they're doing."

That change is reflected in the words of one student, who hopes to work with special needs children.

"I'm really shy and I'm trying to be able to talk to people more, so I can go and live my life," said Emily-Ann Harrison, who nonetheless preserves and tries the same exercises as the extroverts in the group. "Every time I'm up in the circle, I get butterflies in my stomach. It's really tough."

Often, Richardson said, schools lose the focus on educating the whole child.

"As kids progress through school, if they struggle, we take more of the progressive stuff away and give them workbooks ... don't give them the freedom to express and explore," she said. "This is giving some of that back



to those kids."

Adams was exposed to both theatre and play therapy at a young age. Her mother, with degrees in both theatre and social work, was a pioneer in the field in the 1950s, using puppets, theatre and theatrical constructs to help children who had been severely traumatized process and heal.

"I grew up in that environment. When I was little girl my mom took a puppet class from this really unknown guy and then went into hospitals, working in the wards using these puppets. His name was Jim Henson — he became very famous," she jokes. "I have my very own Kermit."

"For me, theatre is not an end, it's not a fluffy thing. Theatre is a means for discovery and transformation."