

Japanese tricksters clown around at festival

By Angela Hall
Staff Writer

Graduates of Japan's short-lived clown college put a crowd-pleasing show on the outdoor stage of the Northern Alberta Children's Festival June 1 - 5.

Kumi Somayama and Cheizuko Hashimoto, aliases Rone and Gigi, clowned around with juggling, mime, balloon sculpture and music-making in the act *Open Sesame*.

But although they delighted crowds in St. Albert, their craft is not always recognizable at home in Tokyo. "Clown culture has a short history in Japan," said Somayama, the English-speaking

half of the duo. "The usual question is 'what's clowning?'"

She added that probably half the people who start performing as clowns in Japan turn to the more well-known art of juggling.

Somayama, 41, and Hashimoto, 31, met about 10 years ago when the Ringling Brothers started an offshoot of their Florida-based clown college in Japan. It folded after three years but not before they learned the tricks of the trade — for almost five months, they were part of the first class of 30 clowns in training.

"Gigi was the first official student and me, I was the second," said Somayama, who grew up in

an acting family.

Since leaving clown college the two have performed the Rone and Gigi gig in the U.S., Ukraine, Russia and in Japanese theatres.

The Northern Alberta Children's Festival marked their first trip to Canada. "It's great," said Somayama. "The first surprise is the big sky — no buildings."

During the week, students on field trips from St. Albert and surrounding communities flooded the grounds around the Arden Theatre and St. Albert Place to take in the show. The festival finale for Saturday night is sold out, but free entertainment will be on site until 7:30 p.m.



Japanese clowns Kumi Somayama and Cheizuko Hashimoto found more appreciation for their craft in St. Albert than in their own country.

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