

CLOWNING AROUND

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Open Sesame's Rone & Gigi

Open Sesame: The Inside Story

By Hiroshi "Eddie" Nakatsuji

(President's note: During the past six to eight years, I've had the opportunity to work with and experience many performances by Rone and Gigi, the originators of Japan's Open Sesame. Because their only appearances in the United States have been at Clown Camp®, many WCA members are unfamiliar with this unique clown organization. This past summer I approached Hiroshi Nakatsuji, one of the student members of Open Sesame, and asked if he'd write an article telling us a bit about the Open Sesame organization. Here is his article.)



"Eddie"

To many, Open Sesame has been a long-hidden oriental secret. As far as my knowledge goes, it's the only theatre clown company and school in Japan. The company currently has four official staff: Rone, Gigi, Penny, and Cathy. Other performers occasionally appear in their shows, but most shows are mainly by these four. They not only have performances as Open Sesame but also teach at their clown studio. There are two main courses at the school. One is called Open Sesame Clown Studio (OCS), a professional clown training program. It equips future clowns with knowledge and skills required to survive as professionals. I'm in this program, by the way. The other is Studio Sesame (SS). This course is mainly for those who pursue clowning as a hobby or a means to do volunteer work.

Rone and Gigi are the originators and driving forces behind Open Sesame and its success. They are not only great clowns but also genuine educators. They know how to maximize the potential sleeping in their students. They have their own method called the "Magical Method." It's a mixture of both American and Russian clown training methods with Japanese flavor. It reflects artistic freedom and positive thinking of the American way and strict discipline of the Russian way. Of course the two are blended and glued together by their Japanese heart. In other words, they've arranged the two methods into something that works in Japan. I have no doubt that it is one of the very best acting/clowning methods available in the country of the rising sun and sukiyaki.



Another vital part of the method is its emphasis on clown ethics and philosophy. Rone and Gigi emphasize the importance of having good clown ethics. As students they encourage us to be clowns even when we're not in make-up and full costumes. We always have to be sensitive to others around us and have a servant heart. They require us to seek how we clowns can contribute to society with our clown heart and skills. Actually I was just scolded for being caught up with self-interest, not paying attention to and helping others. They teach us how to be loving and lovable.

Let me talk a little about myself (It's our way to talk about elders first!). As I wrote above, I'm an aspiring clown who just started clowning. It's a tough fact to accept, but ... I'm the slowest one to learn. Probably all the clowns at Open Sesame unanimously agree with this. They'd have no objection. However, Rone and Gigi comfort me by saying, "Your

clown's in you when you fail!". Great maestros! I know I'll have to fail gazillions of times before I actually learn something from them, but I believe that failing counts somehow. The following is my favorite thing that Rone said at OCS:

"You first have to take off all the masks you are wearing and be who you really are. There live your clowns. Funniest things are almost always your flaws and shortcomings that you put in all your effort to hide. Don't try to be funny. Just be your real self. You are funny enough just by being there!" In answer to some other questions about the program and its students, here are a few more facts. The OCS (the professional training program), has two classes a week on Wednesdays and Saturdays. SS (the volunteer clown program) has a class every Monday. All classes are about 3 hours long (actual classes start at 6:30 and end 9:15ish, but many of us come early and practice/learn new techniques). I have joined both courses, so it's about 9 hours a week.

Many of us have other careers. I work for World Vision Japan, a Christian NGO supporting kids in developing countries. We have: professional clown, street performer, mimi performers (Youhei), health technician, housewife, student, architect, social worker, teacher (I used to be a teacher, by the way), etc. etc. So, work hours vary depending on participant's career.

Open Sesame is a private institute, so it doesn't follow the regular Japanese academic calendar (Japanese schools usually start in April, end in March). Both courses are about 6 months long, but they don't have set starting dates because they change depending on Rone and Gigi's schedule.

The main media to learn about the existence of Open Sesame is word-of-mouth publicity and internet (homepage). Open Sesame is well-known among professional performers/clowns, and many of them recommend aspiring performing artists to study at the school. They also put school ads on their performance posters. I found out about Open Sesame on the internet.

God bless all the clowns and all the hearts that we touch!

(Postscript: Eddie hopes to begin the first clown ministry program in Japan.) ■



President's Message

One of the more enjoyable experiences about being the president of the World Clown Association, is the fact that the president has the honor of deciding who is to be featured on the covers of *Clowning Around*. This decision has the opportunity to present a decided focus for each issue. This month I am delighted to provide readers with a glimpse of clowning from Japan. No other group better represents this area of the world than Open Sesame. As you'll read in the article, "Open Sesame: The Inside Story", this organization is both a performance entity and a school. Its originators, Rone and Gigi, are high-energy performers with exceedingly high standards.

Because I have been able to employ Rone and Gigi at Clown Camp®, I've gotten to know a little bit more about them, each year they come to America. They normally bring about a dozen of their own students along to not only learn from us, but also to showcase their talents. Our evening Open Mike sessions are often highlighted by the hijinks of these Japanese clowns.

As professional performers, Rone and Gigi are only recognized by their professional names. They never use their birth names in any of their work, either with their school or in their professional appearances. (This appears to be a strong custom in their home country.) While their big ears characters are unique and uproariously funny, they also portray other characters in some of their performances. Usually Gigi portrays a male figure, and many times audiences do not realize that she is really a female.

Each year Rone and Gigi assemble at least one new show. Oftentimes these are more akin to what we would call a play, rather than a clown show. Theatrics and precision in timing are very important in their appearances. They routinely practice for several hours each day. Americans marvel



Dr. Rich "Junior" Snowberg
WCA President

at both their commitment to perfection and their dedication. Rone says that because clowning is not readily accepted in Japan, they must strive for perfection in order to bring about a better image for clowning in their country. They find bookings in schools to be their primary audiences. Their appearances feature slapstick and physical comedy, juggling, mime, dance and unique and original material.

I am pleased to announce that Rone and Gigi have agreed to come to Jacksonville and headline our 2003 convention next March. Come to this, their first clown convention appearance in North America, and see if you don't agree with me that this is the funniest and most highly skilled female clown duo in the world.

Elsewhere in this issue of *Clowning Around* you'll read vice president Spaulding's article on preparing for a convention. She's

really got some good points, and I recommend you mark this column for later usage.

Speaking of preparing, I'm packing my bags for a mid September gathering of clown friends and performers from around the world that will be going to Southport England to celebrate president-elect Arthur Pedlar's 70th birthday. He has lined up many friends to come to his hometown and provide a gala evening public performance, as well as a children's show and some hospital visits. I'll have more to report on this fun experience in my next column.

In October, your executive board of the WCA and the Gator Clown's convention planning committee will be meeting in Jacksonville. We will of course be making plans for our spring convention, but also dealing with many other WCA matters. If you have any issues, which you'd like me to add to the agenda, please drop me a line. One of the important matters we'll address, is the long range planning needs for our association. The Long Range Planning Committee Chair, Janet Tucker, has provided the executive board with an in-depth and challenging report for our consideration. We'll have more on this important planning initiative in an upcoming issue of this magazine.

Finally, thanks to those of you that communicated your thanks for the cover and feature article on Dean "Bo Dino" Weiss in our last issue. Many had wondered about his background, and his loving family. It was a pleasure to assemble this material in recognition of a great clown, and the person for whom our memorial educational scholarship program was named. ■

