



## Japan's pioneer clowns

THEY had never seen a clown before they entered the Ringling Clown College Japan programme more than 10 years ago. But Japanese clown duo Rose and Giggi, who only go by their stage names, are now famous the world over and have even opened their country's first and only theatre clown school, Open Seismic, in Tokyo.

"Japan has no clowning culture. We want to let people in Japan know more about clowning. So we opened the school," Rose, 47, told Streets in his English at the NTUC Centre auditorium on Tuesday as partner Giggi sat next to him beside her.

"Many young people in Japan want to be cool actors and actresses or comic stars, not clowns. The quality of clowning in Japan is very low," said Rose.

"Gigi is tough and mean in character. I'm not. I'm always weak and very goofy. People either sympathise with Gigi or roll and by laughing at us, they laugh at themselves."

She added: "Clowning makes life easy."

When asked about family approval for her clowning activities, Rose, who was born into a traditional kabuki actor's family, said: "My father died 20 years ago, so he doesn't know I'm a clown but my mother enjoys my work."

She explained that there is not much of a difference between kabuki and clowning. "The basic point is the same - it's to let people have fun and enjoy themselves."

She met Giggi at the four-month-long Ringling Clown College Japan programme in 1999.

"I was in second position," said Rose. "First position" Giggi, 36, emphasised, pointing to himself with a white grin.

Rose added: "She was the instructor's assistant, so I was like this," leering to her friend.

Neither had attended it actually become clowns, they wanted to be actresses.

"Just after learning clowning for a while, we wanted to become clowns," said Rose. After watching some Russian clowns performing in Tokyo, they decided to learn more in Russia and continued their clown education in Moscow and Kiev in 1991 and 1992.

# Making INMATES smile

Reports by Sharlene Tan

FOR Fanny, Jon and Eddie, meeting Rose and Giggi was very much like meeting their favourite movie stars, although with their big noses, red noses and giant shoes, the two are hardly your typical celebrities.

They are, instead, award-winning female clowns from Japan who are in Singapore to perform and teach as part of the inaugural Clowns-Around-The-World Festival.

Fanny, Jon and Eddie were among 150 inmates of Kaki Bukit Centre Prison School (KBC) who got to watch Rose, Giggi and American clown Lay Mulhally, or Juggles, perform.

They were also among the eight who had taken a clowning course at the prison school and who performed for the inmates.

Jon, 34, told Streets yesterday: "We watched them (Rose and Giggi's) performance on VCD before, when Kook (Kook Pung, executive director of festival organiser Circus Outreach), started teaching us about clowning. And we even did our version of their performance during our performance."

The lucky juggles then entertained with his own brand of humor and magic tricks, sometimes at the expense of his volunteers, who were greeted with boos of laughter from inmates and staff alike.

But it was Rose and Giggi who won rapturous laughter and applause with their side-splitting gags and hilarious antics.

"It was so good," said Fanny, 22. Juggles had words of encouragement for the inmates after the show.

"To the KBC clowns, I can see you all as future clowns. I encourage you to keep that up and don't let go of it," he said.

Rose said on Tuesday: "I was very surprised to learn that a clown programme was provided for prisoners. It's a good point for clowning. I think."

One of the aims of the festival was to raise funds for five beneficiaries - Education Trust Fund, FaithActs, Round Bites, Tampines Family Service Centre and the Singapore After-Care Association (Saca).

Jon said: "It's really meaningful because Saca looks out for people like us. After we get out, we hope to continue with Circus Outreach and give back to society."

Circus Outreach began the programme several months ago as part of the National Youth Achievement Award's (NYAA) skills section, which aims at encouraging the development of personal interests and practical skills.

Nearly 30 inmates have taken part. The prison school has nearly 400 inmates, who range in age from their 20s to a few in their 40s. The syllabus

includes G- and A-level programmes, and IT and vocational training.

"I like that clowning makes others laugh, it brings a smile to their faces," said Fanny, whose best trick is juggling.

"It helps to boost our confidence. We never knew we could do such things."

Next month, the prison school clown programme participants will perform for some hospice patients who will be visiting the school.

Assistant Superintendent of Police Mark Clinton Gillman said that the school wants to introduce clowning as a co-curricular activity next year, along with other performing arts activities.

He told Streets: "They're mostly from different gangs and this activity allows them to interact, break down barriers between the boys. They were so nervous at first but it's done them good."

"I think they should learn to laugh more and get themselves to laugh at themselves more."



Clowns-Around-The-World Festival will be held at NTUC Centre Auditorium from today to Nov 30. Tickets from \$25 to \$40 are available at TicketCharge.