

Lifebeat

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A nose for clowning



PETER GOLDBERG

Johnson, left, and Jed Hancock-Brainerd juggle bowling pins, one of many circus stunts performed in *Red Noses* by the Gamm Theatre in Pawtucket.

Ben Johnson juggles work in hospitals, the theater and a kids' literacy program

BY CHANNING GRAY
JOURNAL ARTS WRITER

Ben Johnson is one of the stars of *Red Noses*, Peter Barnes' black comedy now at The Gamm Theatre in Pawtucket. And he doesn't say a word.

But he does manage to juggle a bunch of Indian clubs, tossing them under his legs. During intermission, he balances a ladder on his chin.

Johnson, 28, stands out in this play about a band of red-nosed clowns who treat victims of the Black Death with generous doses of laughter. Perhaps that's because he's a graduate of clown school and has worked for a number of circuses over the years.

"I made a decision to audition, and it defined my life for the next eight years."

BEN JOHNSON
of Providence

In *Red Noses*, Johnson plays a mute draped in bells that serve as his voice. When they jangle, those around him seem to understand just what he is saying.

Johnson said the role was a challenge, a good one.

To help work out his mimed gestures, he'd make up a text based on responses from the rest of the cast. The technique seems to have worked. He has one of the most intriguing parts in the play.

The reason theatergoers have not heard of Johnson before is because he is a relative newcomer to the area. He moved to Providence in June to be near his girlfriend, Jori Ketten. Both work for Brown's ArtsLiteracy Project, which fosters reading in kids.

But Johnson also continues to work as a clown for the Big Apple Circus. Not under the big top, but ministering to sick children five or six days a month in children's hospitals in Boston and New Haven.

"You have to gear the performance to the age and the mood in the room," he said. "In some cases, the energy is up and people want to be loud and playful. Then five feet down the hall, someone is dying.

"You have to go in with no expectations and be able to switch your demeanor on the spot. You have

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Life is a balancing act for clown and teacher

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to be very perceptive to what people need from you."

Johnson, who grew up in Long Beach, Calif., really didn't pick up juggling until he was on the road performing with Ringling Brothers. Johnson admits to being a competent juggler but says there are people who do it for a living who are "head and shoulders" above him.

In fact, he didn't develop a taste for clowning until he was about 20, around the time he dropped out of college after two years. He was looking for direction in his life.

"Most people are either born into the circus life or dream about it all their lives," he said. "For me, it was sort of out of the blue."

At the time, he was waiting tables in San Francisco. After work, on a bit of whim, he stopped in for a local audition for a school run by Ringling Brothers, headquartered in Sarasota, Fla. It changed his life.

"I made a decision to audition, and it defined my life for the next eight years, artistically and income-wise."

The training lasted an intense nine weeks, six days a week, 14 hours a day. He said he was "inundated with everything basic to clowning."

After a couple of weeks, he started giving free performances to the community to "see what tanked and see what worked."

"School seemed like a really long audition. The real education was getting into the show and getting on a train and performing every day, sometimes two or

three times."

He was given a two-year contract with the circus to perform as a clown. All told, he estimates he took part in 1,000 shows, living out of a three-by-six-foot cell on a train car located next to the humming generator car.

It took some getting used to, but once he got the hang of life on the road, he loved it.

"These are people with a high-level set of skills, and there was so much to learn. The circus was also interesting to me because at its best there are all these people from different countries speaking different languages with a common objective. When it works, it is beautiful."

Over the years, he has worked for Cirque du Soleil's Cirque du Monde, which is an outreach program for after-school kids that placed Johnson in the South Bronx. He taught children in grades 1 through 6 juggling, tumbling, and with a colleague trapeze and rope climbing.

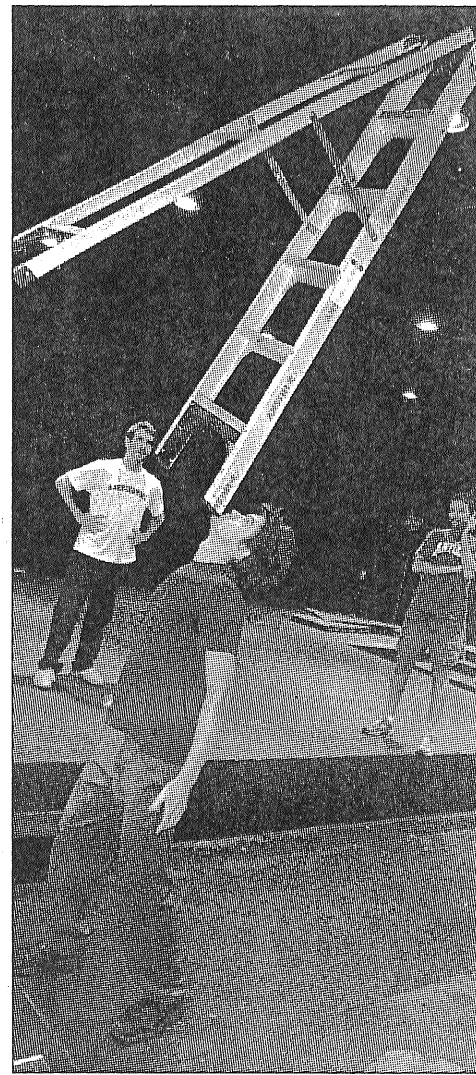
The program is not just about teaching circus skills but about the skills needed to learn them, things such as teamwork and perseverance.

A co-worker in the Brown ArtsLiteracy Program, Steve Kidd, who acts at The Gamm, tipped Johnson off the part in *Red Noses*. He auditioned and got the role.

For now, Johnson just wants to continue performing and teaching.

"I think the best performances have an educational element in them," he said, "and the best classes have an excitement and artistry for a performance."

"If I can just perform and teach, I'll be happy."



GAMM THEATRE

Ben Johnson balances a ladder on his chin during rehearsal at Pawtucket's Gamm Theater as part of preparations for the theater's current production of *Red Noses*. Johnson uses the trick during an entertaining intermission.