

Clown Shiven — alias Gunter Bennung — spends over 200 days of the year away from his Banks Peninsula home and family. He recently spent several of them in Wanganui, performing and teaching. JOHN FRANCIS took part in his clown workshop.

A man with a message

He wears silly underpants, his hat has a mind of its own, and one little Wanganui boy found Shiven the Clown so funny that he nearly wet his pants laughing.

There are pranks with dropped tins, the audience is doused by trick flowers, and he finds some pretty silly ways to play a guitar.

But there are no pies in the face, or broken eggs on the head.

scriptwriter and presenter, but all the while, his boyhood desire kept nagging him.

In 1977, he made the leap back to that dream.

For the past nine years he has been a professional clown throughout Europe — and for the past three years, in New Zealand.

Friends couldn't understand the New Zealand move — they said it was like "going to the desert". But Gunter, who had made a documentary in this country 13 years ago, felt an affinity, and perhaps recognised in the quieter, less sophisticated lifestyle of the place, something his own soul needed.

theatrical background. One pair had a fire-eating act. Another was a writer, who enjoyed performing his own work. One of two had been clowns at galas. There were schoolteachers, and one who wanted to extend his Sunday School repertoire.

The most interesting pupil, who at times threatened to upstage the master himself, was a 75-year-old resident of Hikurangi home for the aged.

It takes close inspection to believe Neville Dalton's age, because the one-time Wanganui Harbour Board diver, has the up-and-at-'em of a boy.

He was at the clown workshop because he wanted to inject some fun and laughter into the lives of the Hikurangi gang.

Neville subjected himself to the same rigorous and revealing exercises as the rest — on the first day, anyway, for the second, he was content to watch.

No wonder — it was an intense two days.

We took it in turns to go through a "car wash", with our fellow students pumelling and rubbing us; we paired off to be led around the room blindfold; and again with eyes closed, we wove a bumpy web of bodies.

And yes, we had a crack at cracking the funny barrier with skits and stunts — not easy, when you are asked to get up and just "let it happen", without preparation. But thanks to the tension-releasing nature of the whole programme, no-one refused to have a go.

For a man who makes a living from being centre-stage, Gunter Bennung did a remarkable job of letting his students have the limelight. And any criticism was couched in the most encouraging terms.

What the man offered us in fact was a renewed appreciation of life, and the value of each one of us.

At one point, in the middle of a clowning exercise, he suddenly stopped to give an impassioned plea for New Zealand's natural and human environment, noting the disconcerting changes since his first visit 13 years ago.

Earlier, he gave an example of his attitude to violence. Sometimes, he said, children get boisterous during his shows, and can't refrain from pushing and shoving him. He stops his act at such a time, and says:

"I may be a big man, but I'm delicate, just like you. I don't hit you, so please don't hit me".

Despite a big foam plastic hammer playing a slapstick role in his act, Gunter says he tried to impart a sense of fun without physical abuse.

And never, he says, does he curry laughs by making fun of another human being. That is the "lowest form of humour".

With the workshop and a few days performing for school and kindergarten groups over, Gunter was off home to Banks Peninsula for one day with his wife Rita, and daughters Julika, 5, and Katya, 1.

Then it was down to Dunedin and the Waimati Festival, to Wellington for a week at the arts festival, then, with his family, to Australia for the World Harmony Day celebrations, and the second Live Aid concert on April 11.

In Wanganui, he left 15 Wanganui people keen to explore and develop further their own special clowns.

Neville Dalton, for instance, may have been the oldest, in our group but he wasn't the slowest. He started designing his own costume straight away, and he was due to give his first performance this morning — to the "old folk" at Hikurangi, at a concert he'd arranged to mark World Vision's 40 Hour Famine.



NEVILLE Dalton, 75-year-old Hikurangi Home resident, with Shiven the Clown. Having taken part in a weekend workshop with the clown's "other self", Gunter Bennung, Neville was due this morning to make his own debut as a funny man, at a concert he organised at Hikurangi.

Food, like the human beings it sustains, is too sacred for that.

At one of his performances at the Sarjeant Gallery, for instance, a child threw an apple on to the stage. The clown stopped his act, explained the significance of food in a world where most are starving, then took a bite from the apple.

Throughout the performance he paused for further bites. That apple became another of his "props" — it was a gentle way to offer a firm message.

Therein lies the ingredient that makes Shiven the Clown more than just a funny fellow.

A whole show may go by without a hint of anything but fun. But if the moment requires it, the clown becomes a man — and the man has a message or two.

Born in Berlin in 1939, Gunter Bennung says he first wanted to be a clown when he was eight years old. He was to become a teacher, actor, Tv reporter,

That's the level on which both Gunter Bennung, and Shiven the Clown, operate — starting from deep within, getting to know one's own fears, desires, the things one hates, and loves — and learning to appreciate these same feelings in others.

At first glance, all this seems to have precious little to do with clowning — but those of us who took part in a two-day workshop with Gunter at Wanganui Community College came to appreciate the connection.

In fact, while there were plenty of laughs that weekend, it was more of a "getting to know you" exercise.

Not a hint of greasepaint, although we did get to play with silly hats — and borrow our teacher's nose.

Mostly, it was the kind of stuff you'd expect to experience in an encounter group — lots of touching, lots of "sharing from the heart".

We students were a mixed bunch. Some had a