

Giving and getting

by Monique Oomen

Gunter Bennung has found a way to share his gift of joy with everybody.

THE TALL lean man in faded jeans and T-shirt leans forward, concentrating on his reflection in the small mirror perched on the desk in front of him and carefully paints his face. White and black around the eyes, red cheeks, a huge red smile on and beyond the mouth. In front of him sit a large group of wriggling schoolchildren, watching with eager anticipation. They're here to see the clown. Clown Shiven. Is this him?

“It takes me about half an hour to do the make-up. It puts me right in the mood. It's a deep concentration where I prepare to start. Outside it looks as if I'm quiet, but inside I'm nervous, because I feel your expectations and you want me to start.”

Make-up finished, the man stands. He has a clown's face but still the clothes of an ordinary man. “What else do I need?” he asks the children. The answers tumble out: a red nose, a pair of baggy trousers, big floppy shoes, a hat. As the directions are shouted out, hilariously misunderstood and finally followed, the man slips away and hey presto the clown appears.

“I want to show you the whole transformation of a clown — something you would never see in a circus or theatre. I build it up from scratch, which is very difficult. Because there's a magic moment when the man has totally disappeared and there's only the clown left — and I don't really know when it happens, but it happens, and all of a sudden kids and everybody are following the clown.”

The room fills with noise, shouting and shrieks of delight; the children — and even some teachers — red-faced and helpless with laughter as the clown fiddles with a music stand to prop it up, attempts to blow a trumpet, tries to pick up several film roll cans which mysteriously keep slipping from his grasp, gets frightened by the sound of a concertina . . . Just as the excitement of the children seems overwhelming, the clown picks up a guitar and strums it expertly, soothing the audience with a lilting song.

“I love my work. It's not like acting or performing. It uses every skill I've learnt on stage but it's more. The secret of being a clown is to live its existence, to be it totally, to change with the moods of the people there.”

The clown is hot; he takes off his coat, hangs it on the wall — only there's no



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coat-hook there so it falls on the teacher below, covering her with metres of green cloth and much confusion; the children and other teachers laugh uproariously as the blushing teacher emerges, hands the coat back — and it's hung up again! The children rush to bring it back to the clown, they reach out to touch him, to get some special recognition.

“There's something very special about working with children. It's the interaction, the exchange of energy. As if I throw a ball and the children throw a lot of colourful balls back to me. I try to involve my audience. I try to build up a love relationship with the children and everybody else. I want to give everybody joy.”

After the performance the children clatter out. They return later in the afternoon for the “follow-up” session, a time when the children can ask any questions they want on clowns and Clown Shiven. And there are plenty of them: What does his name mean? How old is he? How long has he been a clown? Where does he come from? Does he have any

children? How does he make the noise when he blows his nose? . . . Shiven answers all queries seriously and honestly.

Shiven the Clown means the good clown. It's an Indian name, given to him by one of his teachers. His real name is Gunter Bennung. He's German, born in Berlin 45 years ago. He's been on stage for 25 years and became a clown nine years ago, fulfilling a childhood dream. Before that he was an actor, a teacher, a mime, a film producer and many other things. He came out to New Zealand some years ago, loved it, and then campaigned to return and stay for good. He's been here for the last 20 months, was granted residency, and with the support of the Education Department has performed in over 350 schools throughout the country, as well as summer programmes, festivals, and even on the Cook Strait ferries! He lives on Banks Peninsula with his wife Rita and two daughters, and travels round the country in a gaily painted camper van.

The children listen enraptured as he explains his philosophy:

“I don't try to act as a clown. I *am* a

clown. I don't try to *be* funny, I just *feel* funny things and happy things, and this is what I want to express by singing, dancing, or fooling around.”

Yet this is a serious clown. One who won't use food in his acts because there are starving millions in the world, one who won't use any slapstick that involves hitting or kicking or anything that may be construed as violence, one who wants more than giggles as reward for his work.

“I want their laughter — and also their understanding. If it's just for the laughter, it's too cheap for me. I want to pass on a message which is love rather than just stupidity, so it's important for me to create an atmosphere where people are open to understand as well as relax and enjoy.”

And from the response Shiven gets, it seems he achieves this:

“I get about a hundred letters a week. I get fantastic poetry and pictures . . . it's wonderful. It's a result of: you give everything and you get everything.”