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Clown Boswick Has a Ball Leading His Entertaining Life

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Boswick Turnstyle Jr. the clown stands in front of roughly 100 curious and wiggly first- and second-graders in the gymnasium at Ulloa Elementary School in San Francisco's Sunset district, and asks, "What do clowns do?"



"They act funny!" cries one child.

"They do magic!" cries another.

"They scare you!" cries a third.

"They scare you?" says Boswick, furrowing his thick black brows and



rubbing an imaginary beard. "That's just a fringe benefit, really."

Then, on this foggy morning in the Sunset, the day after nobody was elected president, Boswick asks the kids where they might see a clown.

"Do you see clowns in the circus?" he asks.

"Yeah!"

Pointing to his chest: "Do you see clowns in your school?"

"Yeah!"

"Do you see clowns win national political office?"

Now it is the teachers' turn to laugh.

Boswick Turnstyle Jr., when he's not a clown, is David Magidsen, 37, a former Ringling Bros. clown who regales kids at schools, libraries and private parties with jokes, magic and lots of clowning. His niche, he says, is first-year birthday parties.

But that's not all he does. He appeared in a circus scene in the Eddie Murphy movie "Dr. Dolittle." He has appeared in ads for Pacific Bell and Handspring. And he entertains adults at corporate parties -- but as a vaudeville-style juggler, not a clown.

"Adults don't really like clowns," he says. "They think it's kids' stuff."

But Nancy Lawson, founder of A Child's Way preschool, which has centers in Burlingame and Millbrae and where Magidsen has performed for the past five years, says Magidsen's humor is successful both with kids and grown-ups.

"He has asides that he throws in for the adults," she says. "He'd be really funny performing at an adult party, too."

Magidsen is one of only a handful of children's entertainers in the Bay Area, all of whom know and pass work to one another.

So much for the image of the cutthroat -- not to mention killer -- clown. If Boswick kills, it is with prestidigitation, a word with more syllables than legerdemain, which Boswick also practices, when he's not practicing sleight-of-hand and cracking jokes.

At Ulloa, Boswick brings up Andrea D'Amato, 6, and flips three balls around the boy's head. The boy's classmates shriek with delight. Then Boswick takes two of the balls and holds them atop Andrea's head.

"He's Mickey Mouse," he says.

Delighted shrieks.

He holds the balls in front of the boy's eyes.

"He's an alien," he says.

More delighted shrieks.

"I liked when he put the balls in front of my eyes," Andrea will say later. "It was like I was an alien. It was like they were real eyes."

Ulloa first-grade teacher Kelly Lehman says that, to prepare for the show, Magidsen suggested ways classroom tie-ins.

"He told me to talk to the kids about how he learned everything through books," said Lehman, 31, who is in her fifth year at Ulloa. "That as a little kid he went to the library and learned magic from books. I like that he tied it in to our curriculum."

Magidsen, who grew up in San Leandro in a family with two older brothers,

found himself directionless by the time he hit college. That is, colleges, plural. He attended Chabot College in Hayward for two semesters, spent a summer at American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco and two years at San Francisco State University.

"I tried not to study drama," he says. "Nobody in my family was a performer. "

Finally, he gave in, and transferred to Emerson College in Boston, where he studied acting and, with renowned vaudeville clown Davis Robinson, clowning and mime. The studies so deeply affected him that his clown name came to him in the middle of the night.

"I woke up in my dorm room and said, 'I'm Boswick Turnstyle the Clown,' " Magidsen says.

After graduating in 1986, he was accepted to the Ringling Bros. Clown College in Venice, Fla., a three-month "boot camp" where he developed the Boswick character and studied improvisation, makeup and costuming. Plus, he says, they studied "Road Runner" cartoons -- for structure.

"Those cartoons are classic circus gags -- setup, setup, punch line," he says. "And the relationship between comedy characters is always the same -- there's a dominant person and an underling, and the underling always gets the best of the dominant one."

A graduation audition netted him an alternate spot in the Ringling Bros. hierarchy, and five months later, he was on his way to Japan, where he appeared with the circus for a half-year. After that, he and two Clown College friends established "Kloons on Ice," a sketch-comedy juggling troupe headquartered in San Francisco. Magidsen supplemented his income by performing as Boswick at kids' parties.

But by the early 1990s, Magidsen was tiring of Boswick, because Boswick required a lot of white-face makeup, a big wig, and "tons" of clothes. Working at a Japanese amusement park in 1993, where temperatures regularly topped 90 degrees, Magidsen had an epiphany.

"I decided to become a European-style clown," he says. "And that's how 'Jr. ' was born."

Now it takes Magidsen all of seven minutes to put on his makeup: flesh-colored base foundation, black around the eyes and on the

bottom lip, a little cheek rouge and powder to seal it all. He pops on a red clown nose, doffs a polka-dot shirt, multihued vest, big blue clown pants with purple-trimmed cuffs and, of course, oversized clown shoes. He plops a top hat on his head -- and Boswick Turnstyle Jr. is born to clown another day.

Boswick, not surprisingly, is good with kids, say those who know him.

"He's really in tune to the children," Lawson says. "He's a father, so he knows about children."

Indeed, Magidsen and his wife, Diane, who live in San Francisco's Inner Sunset, have two boys: Duncan, 7, and Dustin, 2. Do the boys like having a clown daddy?

"Well, Dusty does," Magidsen says. "But Duncan, he's getting to that embarrassment age. I think he became a teenager when he was, like, 5. Some parents save to send their kids to college. I'm saving for his psychological future."

At Ulloa, Boswick stands in front of the assembled kids and balances his hat on his nose. Behind him is a waist-high trunk on which sit blocks, balls, clubs and other tools of the trade. Clapping his hat back on his head, Boswick performs a trick using two bamboo sticks fitted with tasseled strings. With the help of Yasmeen Hijazi, 6, he makes the strings appear to rise and fall of their own accord. The kids watch, obviously amazed.

Next, Boswick brings up Keegan Yue, 6; the boy watches the clown blow up a balloon, draw a face on it, then puncture it with a

long needle -- without popping it. Keegan is duly impressed. (After the show, said Lehman, Keegan wrote a thank-you letter to the clown: "Dear Boswick -- You're the bestest clown in the hole world.")

Suddenly -- kraaaak! A latch on Boswick's trunk gives out, and the trunk collapses, sending balls and clubs and blocks flying. Apparently responding to some genetic homing signal, the kids rush Boswick and the trunk, grabbing things, tossing things, shrieking. It's like an elementary school version of "Lord of the Flies." But Magidsen remains unruffled.

Order is restored and, soon enough, the show comes to a close when Boswick balances first a chair, then a step-ladder on his chin.

By way of postmortem, Yasmeen Hijazi sums up the show: "It was fun."

Fun. . . and filled with sensibility for kids and adults alike -- especially when it comes to those jokes adults will get and kids might not.

"Children, as they develop, don't understand double-sided humor," Lawson says. "They only concentrate on the obvious. So the humor (Boswick) presents for them will be more visual, whereas for the adults what he does will be more verbal, with a lot of double entendres and current events. He'll look away from the kids and to the audience to see if they've gotten the joke."

Magidsen says he aims some jokes at the grown-ups in part for the sake of the kids.

"Going back to those Road Runner and Bugs Bunny cartoons," he says, "I loved getting stuff I'd think other kids weren't getting. If kids do that, they feel smart."

And feeling smart is much more fun than being scared by the funny clown with the big red nose.

"Children don't like masks, or faces that are too vibrant," Lawson says. "And sometimes clowns are loud, with horns and bells and whistles. But (Boswick) is not loud. He introduces himself in a low-key way, his costume is not scary, he's warm -- and he's funny."

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