

# CLOWNING AROUND

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Headliner 2013

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# I'm Really Excited!

— Rich Snowberg-WCA 2013 Convention Chair

**Y**es, I'm really excited! Your WCA 2013 convention is going to be the most unique action filled convention you've ever attended. This historical convention will be the first WCA convention ever held in Asia. It will be the first WCA convention in which we set aside one entire day for humanitarian work in the community. And it will host the most international array of members ever to attend one of our conventions. To help us celebrate the WCA's 30th anniversary we've brought together new features, great new talent, unique cultural interactions, and opportunities for everyone to clown in the local community, two spectacular evening clown shows, and even some new competitions. You can just imagine how the photos, memories and stories you'll take back home will become lifetime memories for you and your friends. Now let me share with you some of the highlights and details for our February 2013 WCA convention.

You want fresh ideas and new convention classes? Well at least half of the convention's educational sessions will be lead by non-USA presenters. In fact at least ten sessions will be lead by Asian clown arts professionals. As registrants you are going to experience clowning knowledge you've likely never before been exposed to at other conventions. There will be a good mix of skill development sessions that will have you on your feet. Because of the cultural diversity of our presenter sessions you will likely be provided many different insights into clowning.

The 2013 convention will feature a panel discussion on clowning throughout the world. Current plans include panel members from Canada, England, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Caledonia, Singapore, Taiwan, and the USA sharing information on where clowns appear in these countries, how clowning is accepted and what type of clowning skills are most popular. This should result in a fascinating program.



Two evening shows will be presented. Our headline entertainers RONE & Gigi will be on stage for a 90-minute action packed appearance. You can read more about them in this issue's featured

articles elsewhere in this issue of *CLOWNING AROUND*. On Thursday evening we will host an International Clown Charity Show. This show will feature eight or more different acts from around the world. This will likely be one of the most ambitious clown variety shows ever produced by the WCA. Bruce Johnson



will host this gala show. All attendees will be able to see this performance in addition to locally invited guests from nursing homes, orphanages, special needs facilities, etc.

The opening evening theme party will be quite unique. Your Borneo Adventure will introduce you to your WCA leadership but more importantly cultural performers and local food. The evening's highlights will include multiple appearances by Bung Beratak, a local professional cultural dance group. This group also includes musicians utilizing many hand-made instruments. These traditional instruments will be used to accompany the professional dancers concluding with opportunities by convention attendees to join in the dances. A buffet of local delicacies will be provided halfway through the evening. Have you ever tasted pasta aglio olio, ice kacang, or yong chow fried rice? Yes, for the faint-at-heart there will also be foods such as mixed vegetables, lasagna, and dessert delicacies. However the opportunity to sample a great variety of new foods is one of the unique advantages of travel to foreign countries.

I am very pleased that we have a very detailed convention schedule for you to review. While it is still in draft form you will find a copy of this schedule in the pages that follow this column. Most, but not all of our lecturers names are listed beside the sessions they will lead. Notice when such things as competitions, off-site activities, the theme party and evening performances will take place. This is going to be an action filled five days of memorable enjoyment.

Sarawak Smiles is what we are calling our Thursday schedule of activities. This will be our first ever-humanitarian day where we go out into the community and serve others. For the most part registrants will be going out to clown in schools, hospitals, orphanages, special needs facilities, shopping centers and before other civic and charitable organizations. One non-clown option available to our registrants is to take part in the Heart-to-Heart Orangutan Program. This is a program that provides you with an opportunity to work for a day in the orangutan rehabilitation center. (There are only two of these located in all of Borneo, and this one is within a thirty-minute drive from our host hotel.) More specific details of this program can be found on our WCA website. The cost for this program is \$220 (USD) and includes transportation, entrance fees, tools, stationary, lunch and a donation to the Orangutan Conservation Fund. If you want to make a difference in the efforts to protect this endangered species, this is a significant program for you to consider.



## RONE and Gigi

### Open Sesame, Japan's Theatrical Clown Troupe

— Bruce "Charlie" Johnson

**T**wo clowns with very large ears stand on stage, each reading a page from the newspaper. Suddenly the short fat one accidentally tears his paper in half. His tall thin partner tries to copy him, but only manages to tear a small piece off the paper. The short one tears his paper in half several times. The tall one tears another small piece off and then manages to tear it in half. Excitedly he repeatedly tears his paper. The short clown then restores his paper revealing that the name Gigi is spelled across the center in large red letters. The tall clown tries to restore his paper, but it is still in small pieces. When Gigi begins to laugh at him, he throws the wadded up newspaper at Gigi. Then he gets a sign announcing that his name is RONE. Gigi grabs his sign pulling it away from him revealing that he has a second smaller RONE sign that had been hidden behind the first. Gigi grabs that sign, and RONE tips his hat allowing a banner with his name on it to unfurl. Gigi tries to hit him with the signs, but he ducks and accidentally hits Gigi with his hat. RONE runs around behind a waist high wall set up across the back of the stage and descends an escalator. Gigi tries to follow him but gets onto a conveyor belt that does not descend. Their chase scene behind the wall includes walking down stairs, riding the moving slide walk, ascending and descending escalators, and going up and down in elevators. At the end, RONE pulls an overhead chain and as the sound of a toilet flushing is heard Gigi spins around as she is pulled down.

That is the signature piece of RONE and Gigi, the Open Sesame theatrical clown troupe from Japan. They are our 2013 Borneo Convention headliners. You will have the opportunity to see them in performance and to attend their classes.



Gigi is Chizuko Hashimoto. She began clowning when she attended the first session of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College™ held in Japan in 1989. She returned the second year as a member of the staff assisting Tuba Heatherton with the juggling classes. One of the students the second year was Kumi Somayama who would become RONE.

RONE is from a theatrical family. Her father was a Kabuki actor. RONE was an actress appearing in straight plays, musicals, television, and movies prior to attending the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College.™

RONE said, "I was a lazy student at Clown College. I would rather talk than practice. In conversations with Gigi we discovered that we were both interested in performing clown plays. We understood each other very well so we decided to become partners."

Gigi said, "There are three approaches to being a clown. You can approach it as a business. You can approach it as art. You can approach it as a caring clown. All three are okay, but our approach is to try to combine clowning and art."

Inspired by a performance in Japan by Mimicrech, a six-member clown troupe from the Ukraine, they decided to go to Moscow, Russia to continue their education in 1991. At that time they did not speak any Russian. Gigi said, "The classes were based on mime. Even though we could not understand what the instructors said we could understand and copy the movement."

In addition to the language barrier, the duo faced the food shortage caused by the recent break up of the Soviet Union. According to RONE, "We stood in lines for bread. The Russian people were very kind to us and they did everything they could to help."

"At first we were both goofy characters," RONE said, "but that didn't work. Then Gigi created her new character."

"My first character was a silly girl," said Gigi. "In Russia, I created a fat older man character. My name came from Zsa Zsa which is a Russian term for grandfather. Also, many young kids in Japan call their grandfather Gigi. Combining the two gave me Gigi as my name." Gigi's new character was arrogant and demanding while RONE's character remained naïve and impish.

They have since created younger characters with more exaggerated Auguste make up including their trademark big ears attached to skull caps. Gigi constructed a fat body suit that she wears with both of her male characters. Her older man character has a beard and mustache drawn on with eyebrow pencil. They perform most often as their Big Ears characters, but still use their original old men in some of their clown plays.

They have recently created even younger characters, two little children. They strap shoes to their knees and perform while kneeling to make themselves shorter. That allows for some amazing lean effects. In one very charming scene the children are in a day care center waiting for their mothers. At first the two children do not get along, but they end up becoming friends. The highlight of the scene is playing a song together on bells. They will be performing this act during the international charity show at our convention in Borneo.

In 1992, the duo went to Kiev to study more Russian style clowning. They later studied clowning and mime from Nola Rae, a clown/mime based in London.

Although they spoke very little English at the time, Gigi and RONE attended the University of Wisconsin Clown Camp® in 1997 as participants. RONE explained, "We tell our students to go to Clown Camp® even if their English is not good enough to understand everything the instructors say. We tell them to go to make a friend that will expand their brain. It is important to learn magic and juggling, but in clowning it is even more important to learn hospitality."

Their mime training is evident in their wall routine. While the mechanics of their mime illusions are simple, the details they have added are what make it effective. For example, the mime elevators stop with a little bounce. They practice yoga and work out at gyms to maintain the strength and flexibility necessary to perform their routines.

Mime is just one basis for their comedy movement. Clowns have been described as living cartoon characters. RONE and Gigi studied Tom and Jerry cartoons to learn more about comedy, timing, and movement.

Physical gags in the Tom and Jerry cartoons are punctuated with sounds. Gigi and RONE do the same thing in their live performances. Using a collection of sound effects recorded on a mini-disc Cathy,





a third member of their troop, provides the sounds in synchronization with their actions. They rehearse extensively to perfect their timing. However, even when they improvise, Cathy is able to anticipate their actions and provide the appropriate sound. RONE said, "Cathy knows how we prepare for a hit. We never just hit each other. We always prepare. (RONE demonstrated how she draws her arm back before moving it forward in a slap.) Also, Cathy observes our breathing to know when we are going to do something."

When they rehearse, they make extensive use of video tape to see what they look like because they do not work with an outside director. Gigi directs their performances as well as those of their students. (Gigi is the artistic director of Open Sesame while RONE is the business manager.) Gigi takes her role seriously and her students joke that she always says "one more time please."

RONE and Gigi choose Open Sesame as the name of their troupe because it is known in Japan as a magical phrase that opens doors. They hoped that the name would bring them good luck in opening opportunities for clowning for themselves and others.

RONE and Gigi do everything they can to improve the quality of clowning in Japan because it is a relatively new art form in their country. The majority of Japanese residents have never seen a clown. When they see one for the first time it establishes their opinion of clowns because they assume all clowns are the same. RONE explained that if the clown is good and contributes to the success of the event, they are likely to hire another clown in the future. If the clown is of a poor quality, they are not interested in hiring any other clowns. So they teach classes in clowning, and some of their previous students were actually working for their business rivals at the time.

Their desire to do clown plays has come true with several full theatrical performances complete with sets and special lighting effects. One of their plays told the story of two old men checking into a sanitarium. In another the clowns are tourists traveling on the Titanic. Members of their ongoing professional clown classes fill out the cast of their plays.

In 2010 the name of their play was "Scrap of Memory." RONE played a homeless man setting up home on a piece of abandoned property. He had very few personal possessions. He did have a photo scrapbook preserving his memories. Gigi played a robber who decides to use the same property as a hide out. The two just miss seeing each other, but are amazed by how the placement of objects keeps changing. Finally Gigi discovers the scrapbook and finds his photo in it. RONE and Gigi knew each other previously. The play ends with RONE convincing Gigi to give up his life of crime. Ironically less than a year later the earthquake and tsunami would leave many Japanese citizens homeless with just a few possessions to preserve their memories.

During their first year at Clown Camp<sup>®</sup>, RONE and Gigi impressed everyone with their skillful performances during Open Mike. Richard Snowberg, the director of Clown Camp<sup>®</sup>, invited them to return the following year to perform one of their clown plays. I was seated next to Lee Mullally, Clown Camp<sup>®</sup> Assistant Director, during that ninety-minute show. Suddenly he leaned over to me and said, "And they come here to learn from us!" Everyone was amazed by their outstanding timing and exceptional technical skill combined with clearly defined characters and dramatic conflicts.

Richard and Lee worked hard to find staff members for Clown Camp<sup>®</sup> who were adept both at performing and teaching. Performances by the Open Sesame students were testimony to the effectiveness of RONE and Gigi as instructors, so they became regulars on the Clown Camp<sup>®</sup>

staff. They were part of a group of ten Clown Camp® instructors from around the world invited to teach and perform in Singapore at the 2004 Clown Around The World Festival where His Excellency H.R. Nathan, the President of the Republic of Singapore, saw them perform. RONE and Gigi were part of a group of six instructors that went on to Malaysia following the festival to promote clowning, particularly caring clowning and clown ministry, in that country. A year later they returned to Singapore to spend a month working with Knick Pang's CircusOUTREACH. They performed in prisons and taught clown classes to prisoners and at risk youth. They have performed and taught several times in Singapore, including the 2010 Clown Camp™ program held in that country.

They were also part of the Clown Camp® program at the 2005 World Clown Festival in Nagoya, Japan. In addition to the Clown Camp® programs, they have taught and performed at the 2001 Clowns International Festival in Bolton, England. They attended the 2004 International Clown Festival in Korea. RONE and Gigi were the headliners for the 2003 World Clown Association Convention in Jacksonville, Florida and the 2009 World Clown Association Convention in Denver, CO. They have both worked hard to improve their use of the English language for business and instructional purposes.

Both clowns were initially silent, but as she has learned more English, Gigi has become more vocal uttering sounds and short sentences.

Their acts and skills continue to evolve and improve. Their entertainment excellence was recognized in 2002 when Clowns International named them as the Best Clowns in the Non-member category. A year later they won the second place award at the prestigious 2003 International Clown Festival in Monte Carlo. In 2004, they competed at Angel Ocasio's Comedifest tying for first place and winning the People's Choice Award.

RONE said, "Winning awards is important because they give us credibility in Japan. Somebody once asked Nola Rae what is the hardest part of being a professional clown. She said, 'Getting the job.' It is not easy being a clown in Japan, but we love it very much so what else can we do."

That love of the art inspired RONE and Gigi to work extremely hard to develop their clowning, sometimes under great hardship. They are very generous in sharing what they have learned to improve the quality of clowning worldwide. We are fortunate to have them once again as our convention headliners.

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Addendum

# RONE & Gigi

— Rich Snowberg

**B**oth my wife and I have been friends with Rone and Gigi for over twenty years. And besides their extensive work for me at Clown Camp® programs in the U.S., Japan, Scotland, Singapore, and Malaysia we have also vacationed together. These two stars had little experience with the United States so one of our first adventures together was a trip to the Grand Canyon. Here they couldn't resist the opportunity to clown around on a not very steep ledge overlooking the vast canyon. A few years later they visited us in Colorado, where we took them river rafting, horseback riding, up Pikes Peak and then to a melodrama. Also while in Colorado they agreed to entertain our grandson at his birthday party. Needless to say he was thrilled to have them perform in his house.

When we've had the opportunity we have also merged fun during events associated with Clown Camp. So we've often taken time off and visited sites in their country of Japan, as well as relaxed on a cruise in the Caribbean. This cruise, which also included Lee Mullally, as well Cathy- Rone and Gigi's accompanist, was one of the very few times we were able to pose for a somewhat formal picture. We have always enjoyed their enthusiasm to try new things and explore the world.

When Clown Camp® completed its 30th anniversary, I was pleased that RONE asked if they could host a Clown Camp in Japan. This program, which has now run for two years, is carrying on the Clown Camp tradition in Asia. Their program is inclusive of participants of all ages. They work on many different skills and end up producing a program that includes all participants. The program is located in an outdoor environment far from Tokyo. The photos below share images of many of their participants and staff. 🌟

