



A real class clown

by Anton Katz

Pretend, for a moment, that you are five years old and have never seen a live clown before. As you lift up your eyes and swallow a piece of birthday cake, in comes Judy Kerman, clown extraordinaire. Chances are, she'll enjoy the performance as much as you.

A profound love for children is what makes Kerman, a second-year York student, do what she does. An aspiring languages teacher, she is currently majoring in French while enrolled in the faculty of education. While her Thursdays are devoted to teaching children at public school, her ability to hold their attention stems from her experience as a clown.

It was while babysitting for a woman holding a birthday party that Kerman got her start. The party wasn't going well, so the mother asked Kerman to come downstairs and supervise. She picked up a guitar, began to sing and captured the children's inter-

est. From then on, she knew this was the right milieu for her.

At the age of 12, she spent the best \$80 of her life attending a four session clowning course. She learned some fundamental techniques, but asserts that the course was more useful from a 'what not to do' standpoint.

"[The instructors] weren't concerned with how they were being received by the children," she says. "All they cared for was their own performance."

Most of her skills are self-taught. The use of puppets, blowing up balloons, guitar-playing and face-painting are all skills she acquired on her own.

Moreover, as she has continued to hold shows, demand for her services has steadily increased. From a fun way to make extra cash, clowning has become big business for her. She advertises in a community newsmagazine, distributes flyers and relies on word of mouth.

Her customers often ask for a specific type of show. If it's for two-year-olds, only singing may be appropriate as balloons can scare them. Flexibility is the key word; while one day she may perform at a birthday party for 10, the next she may work before an entire public school for a Christmas show in a gymnasium.

Attend one of her shows and you'll witness an elementary lesson in group dynamics. "Children are so honest, so open with their ideas," she explains. "If they don't like something they'll tell you."

Trying to keep a roomful of discriminating children happy is not an easy task. Under the watchful eye of a mother or father, not to mention the children, she often feels like someone under a microscope. It also requires that she constantly be in tune to the group's needs. "I can walk into a birthday party and the kids think something is babyish," she says, "or that I just don't look like a clown."

Every show is important, requiring that she bring a fresh outlook and pleasant approach. She often concentrates on the birthday child, capturing his or her attention. If unhappy, she makes the child feel important by having him or her be a helper. Larger groups are easier, the collective energy of the audience spurring her on.

"Mr. B" is the star of most shows. As Kerman moves puppets in her hands, she invents his story for the children. Mr. B. is a tough guy with a deep voice — a take-off on television's Mr. T. The children love the character and giggle as they watch him assert himself. But Mr. B. has a problem. He never plays fair and always takes other puppets' belongings. Kerman turns the little presentation into an exercise on sharing. At the end of the story, the other puppets teach Mr. B. to be less selfish. Often the children pick up on the theme, and show signs of altruism.

Next, Kerman blows up long balloons and has the children help her twist them into shapes of dogs, butterflies and other animals. Face-painting is also a crowd favourite; the children usually have interesting ideas about how Kerman's face should look. Her left cheek may have a star painted on it and lately she's been getting plenty of practice painting the Batman insignia on her forehead. When it comes to their faces, the children are more specific. One boy described to her in minute detail how to paint B.J. Birdy, the Blue Jays' mascot, on his face.

Each show has its own personality, reflecting the diverse nature of her audiences. Kerman explains that for the show to be successful, "it has to appear brand new and unique, as if Mr. B. is making his first ever appearance."

She vividly recalls her best show, a birthday party for 35 children a few years ago. When she arrived, a young boy took her by the hand and escorted her around the house, introducing his friend, the clown, to his other companions. After he praised her for singing and told her she was special, the eager lad proposed marriage. Flattered, she informed the slick-haired Romeo who wore a dilapidated green suit, that it was better to remain friends.

For so many children, Kerman is exactly that, a friend. In return, they have enriched her. She finds she's become more open with her peers and feels she'll be a better parent. Clowning has boosted her confidence, forcing her to take risks and be accountable for them.

"Every show is a test," she emphasizes, "and a consistent challenge in your everyday life is essential. You need to strive for goals and have a focus."

The importance of goals is central to her life. As she alternates between school, teaching, tutoring and weekends of clowning, she looks for perks to keep her going. "Some days I'll wake up, have three shows and homework to do and I may not feel like being a clown for the day," she says. "But I get to the show and always find someone who likes something about my show, leaving me fulfilled."