

Send in the Clowns ~ Siberia

by "Rigoletto" Bill Waters



Rigoletto aka Bill Waters with children from Ulan Ude Siberia

"There's nothing so awesome as a clown let loose in the streets! -- Ken Feit

Few people in the world can say where Ulan Ude is, much less say they've been there. But twenty clowns from Italy, Denmark, Australia, Puerto Rico and the US went to this place in Central Siberia in August to spread the word in their own fool's way that humor, laughter, fun and creativity are legitimate and effective ways to promote human understanding, happiness and healing across national boundaries.

It started with an idea promoted by the Gesundheit Institute and its founder, Dr. Patch Adams, that the shortest distance between two people is a smile (Victor Borge said it, but Dr. Patch Adams institutionalized it). That a good way to get this message out to the world is to turn a bunch of clowns loose on the streets and in the halls, rooms and offices of institutions. Institutions usually generate seriousness among staff and the people they serve, not humor, laughter and joy.

The clowns on this trip, with the exception of two professionals from Italy, were just men and women with professions, jobs and families back home who were compelled for their own reasons to be "fools" in red noses, costumes, face paint. In their own unique ways we went into institutions housing and caring for children from distressed families and tended to by dear and dedicated but pathetically under-resourced and underfunded staff. Most had little to no experience clowning in such places and only two or three spoke any Russian at all. Yet, despite the potential barriers to

connecting closely, connection happened and important human bonding took place every day at various levels of intensity.

LOVE was the word heard most often during the interaction on the hospital wards, orphanage rooms, school yards and city streets. Love in the generic sense of the word as a positive and profound emotion, readily accessible. Love that is easily reflected when people are given an opportunity to join with no other agenda than to laugh together, smile at each other and "play around" with balloons, magic, music and touch.

What this experience did well, I think, for all those people involved, was to expose the "truth." If we could just get beyond, transcend SERIOUSness, (and the solemnness and gravity that word and mind set implies and thrusts upon us), and instead just accept the RESPONSIBILITY that we all have in an increasingly interdependent world village. This is a responsibility to relate to each other with flexible compassion and HUMOR, and then we just might have a future as global partners in a tolerant, respectful and even playful human community.

It's not so complex. It's really quite simple. Humor and the flexibility it generates -- to think and to behave differently and to therefore invite a wide, diverse range of creative options in human relations -- might just be the idea whose time has come.



Siberia was indeed a dream. Look on your map of Central Asia, find Lake Baikal and on either side of it at the lower end find Ulan Ude on the east where we spent six days and Irkutsk on the West where we spent three days. Ulan Ude is a ragged, frontier city of 400,000 with a significant Buryat population. They're basically Mongolians who speak Russian. The city is not attractive in any way -- except for the friendly, welcoming, beautiful people who endure it -- and the river valley which it occupies. We visited orphanages, schools and prisons there and managed to put some smiles and lightness on the faces of many of the children and their caretakers.

There is an obvious lack of resources -- as you can easily see immediately when you enter a hospital or an orphanage -- patients in the halls, mismatched bedding, bathrooms without running water or toilets that flush, stifling hot dormitories, hopeless looks on faces. But what a difference a few clowns from the US, Italy and Denmark can make! We'd leave these places after an hour or two of clowning and staff and residents alike would be laughing and shouting "We love you!" And we'd be shouting it right back at them. A few small gifts like balloons, pencils, stickers and foam red noses and joy replaces depression.

Irkutsk is known as the "Paris of Siberia" and by comparison with Ulan Ude it is a sophisticated, European City. Tree-lined boulevards, sidewalk cafes, etc. not to mention gorgeous, tall and leggy, self-confident, tantalizing Russian women everywhere. By comparison with the real Paris, it's a Russian backwater reflecting much the same despair and disrepair as Ulan Ude.

To get there we crossed Lake Baikal on a small fishing boat. The trip took a day and it was the most beautifully bright blue, clear, sunny day you can imagine in your most hopeful dream. The lake was like glass. From beginning to end of the trip we danced and sang to Beatles and Russian folk music blaring from two massive speakers on the wheelhouse. We drank vodka - with the captain and his wife and daughter and ate fried Oymul, a fresh water salmon found in abundance only in Lake Baikal.

After the trip and on our way by bus to Irkutsk we stopped in a deep, dark birch forest, right out of German Romantik and took a

"Banya" or Russian Sauna, men in one bath house, women in another. 10 minutes of almost unbearable cooking during which you're whipped mercilessly with birch branches. Then just as you're about to pass out, your torturer orders you out and directs you toward the dock where, following his lead you run like a madman for relief and plunge into icy Lake Baikal. Incredibly, when you come up for air, you immediately think about going through the entire thing again. Which I did until I was so mellow I felt liquid and indomitable. I could have glided through a horde of sword brandishing, raging, threatening Mongolians with a giddy smile on my face. Instead, I walked over to the groaning, food and drink-laden candlelit table on the Banya porch and began to drink cold Russian vodka and colder Russian beer accompanied by roast pork, boiled potatoes and lots of chopped fresh vegetables, including four or five different varieties of cucumber.

We finished the trip with another day of clowning in Red Square where barefooted Gypsy kids stole my balloon pump, my whistle, and all my other performance equipment, but also where a young lady of about 16 and her brother, about 11, Sasha and Vasy, gave me half a 50 Ruble bill with their names and home town, Norilsk, inscribed on it saying, "please take this to remember us by, we love you!" It can make a grown man weep in one simple lesson! Then we boarded an overnight train in a four person sleeper compartment to St. Petersburg and two days in the "Venice of the North", mostly just looking around. Too "clowned-out" to do anymore.

Bill Waters is a retired professor of Criminal Justice at Northern Michigan University who lives in Marquette, Michigan. Presently he is a consultant to criminal justice organizations around the world on the use of humor in police and prison work.

He has been clowning since graduation from Clown Camp in 1997. His first "clown" trip was to China with Patch Adams and a delegation of forty clowns in Sept. 2000. He can be reached via e-mail at WJest@aol.com