

One of New York's Finest

Michael Fandal of New York City is a retired New York Police Officer and clowns around town, the country and most recently in Israel.



Ernst Desire, the Clown travels from Old Jerusalem to the West Bank on a bullet proof bus with children from the Yeshiva School).

“Have you heard the joke about the roof? Oh never mind it’s over your head. I’d tell you the one about butter, but you might spread it around! I like giving something quick for people to laugh at. When I’m clowning in the city [NYC] often at a traffic light, people might yell, ‘Hey, Clown! Do some magic!’ I return with ‘Give me some food and I’ll make it disappear!’ Or I’ll say to someone walking down the street ‘Hey, you dropped your footsteps!’ They always look down and we both laugh. I grew up on Coney Island and there you could talk to anyone you wanted. That’s just New York.”

Shobi lived in Manhattan for 17 years before moving to California. The people are funny, tough and very friendly. You could get into deep a conversation with a stranger just standing at a subway stop! I think people live closer together and as a result find it easier to share their space and ideas. This article is from a phone interview with Michael whom I have known for years. Having a serious conversation with Michael is hard, as he is always telling you a joke or making a pun. However, through it all there is a heart as big as the Big Apple -- nick name for New York City.

“You know what the cop said to Marcel Marceau [the famous mime]? ‘You have the right to remain silent.’”

At an early stage Michael learned how to do a handstand. “So I had a skill,” he jests. Michael’s been clowning around since 1978 when he took a workshop with Mark Stolzenberg. “I took the test to be a cop in 1973 after graduating college, but there was a big freeze on city jobs, so I became a substitute teacher. That year I took a comedy workshop class and also did some standup comedy. In 1975 they started laying off police and there were big demonstrations, so I went to one on the Brooklyn Bridge, did some comedy, and announced my nomination for presidency.” So even on his ‘beat’ as a New York Police Officer on the Westside, Greenwich Village, he says “My clown was always incubating.”

“In 1991, I was supposed to go to Israel with the Jewish Cops, but because of the Gulf War, they canceled the trip. I was all pumped up, so I decided to go anyway. The first time I went to Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem. This last time (2002) I planned it a little better and even got in some sightseeing. I’d stay in one place and travel around from there, as I felt it was safer. After my first trip some Jewish people said, ‘You have a passport to heaven. What you did was really beautiful.’ So I figured, ‘Let me do an encore.’”

Clowns to the Rescue - A Reverse Combat

“I went to Israel because I am just grateful to be alive. All those people who got killed on 9/11. For me it was a *Clowns to the Rescue* sort of thing. It’s *Reverse Combat*. It’s empowering. Even though you’re not in costume, you have that spirit of a clown.”

“Those who have the calling look for the opportunities to find humor all the time. You sometimes have to hold yourself back. Not everybody appreciates it, but you get a feel for it. One time I’m on the subway and this woman fights to get the doors open after they have closed. She holds up the train, and then has the nerve to call the conductor a jerk. So I said, ‘Remember, a jerk is a pull, a pull is a yank, and a Yank is a full-blooded American.’ Everyone laughed. It’s just a little humor to defuse the situation.” [Of course it helps to be a 6-foot tall X-Cop from Coney Island.]

But Michael isn’t always the wise cracking cop clown. “Once I came out from visiting in a nursing home and saw a little girl crying. ‘What’s up?’ I asked. She said, ‘I hurt my ankle.’ Her parents went to get ice. So I put my squeaker (which I always carry) to my chest and gave it a couple of squeaks. ‘Ya think you have problems?’ Then I did some magic tricks for her. By the time her parents came out, she had stopped crying.”

One of Michael’s favorite lines after giving a child something like a balloon. “The parent will insist with a child. ‘What do you say Jamie?’ If the child is confused, I say, ‘What is 5Q and 5Q?’ If the kid doesn’t figure it out, I say ‘10Q.’ After which I say, ‘You’re Welcome’.”

So what does a clown do in a foreign country that speaks a different language?

“Once I was in a Russian documentary film. It happened I was in New York City Central Park and there was a guy up in a tree, I yelled up to him ‘What are you, the branch manager? Get down from there!’ Near the UN I had met a Russian actress. You know she was so hot the sidewalk was smoldering. I started a conversation. She knew this well known documentary producer. When he found out there was a clown cop, he was interested, so I got in the film. I picked up a little Russian then and I also worked with PAL and some Russian immigrants.” And who can live in NYC without learning a little Yiddish!

..... Clowns in Israel

Michael continues, "There was a limit as to what I could bring to Israel. They even confiscated my toy handcuffs. I wanted to bring Whipped Cream in an aerosol can (like RediWhip), but they wouldn't let me take it in!" Why whip cream? "To whip war of course! For my teaching I learned to use tactile senses. I spray the cream in the kids' hands - to whip whatever. We improvised in Israel and put regular whipped cream in a syringe (without the needle), so I could squeeze it out. It went 'poof' all over this soldier's face. 'Where did you say you lived?' he said authoritatively. That got a big chuckle, but that ended the whipping-the-war gag. Mostly I gave out clown sponge noses to the staff and did some juggling and magic. And I did my handstand act where I fell down from a handstand -- my skill remember?"

"I didn't really have an itinerary, so the trip was spontaneous. I met people on the airplane telling them I just wanted to entertain. One guy, who worked in a settlement on the West Bank, invited me there. He said 'Don't you worry you get on a bullet proof bus to get there.' [See Photo on previous page]

"The only time I felt unsafe was on an open highway where anyone can just shoot a round off. One woman said 'Don't walk around in your clown costume; they will think you are making light of our situation. I know sometimes people give bad advice, but she was a tour guide, so I listened to her. But I also listen to myself. In any case, I decided it was OK and did walk around in my costume. I had to go to the Yeshiva School in my clown costume and decided to walk. But I got lost, so I got a taxi into downtown Jerusalem. It turned out to be an Israel-Arab cabdriver. We negotiated and I decided to hire him to drive me around. I figured it would be safer with an Israel/Arab taxi driver, then taking all my clown stuff on a bus where I'd be a real target. I figured he would be asking for trouble if he decided to kill a clown who was out going to a hospital to entertain people, including Arabs in a hospital in Haifa.

"It turned out that the taxi driver had three kids in a private school in East Jerusalem. So I went to their school to entertain. [See Photo below] 300 children greeted *Ernest Desire* in the playground at a Private School in East Jerusalem.] On the highway on the way back from Haifa we were able to get through check points quickly because I was a clown. I worried about that. I didn't want to give terrorists the idea of dressing as clowns.

Nobody Owns His or Her Next Breath.

"As a police officer you're familiar with danger. You have to walk into it all the time. A lot of people are excitement junkies. You have to know yourself. A certain amount of danger can be a 'turn-on,' if it is manageable without being reckless.

"In Israel, I went back to the area of the pizza place that was bombed and sat there wearing my NYPD cap. I had a sense I was asking for it when I wearing it, but I just wanted to do it. This was all done in defiance to the terrorist. I knew some of the people killed in the world trade center. In Israel I was in places where there had been bombings and where there were bombing later. I figured that I've lived enough. I knew that there was a danger, but I did what I had to do. It made me feel like I was doing something meaningful. I knew of the danger, but I had to trust a higher power. I had this attitude 'If something happens to me in Israel while I'm clowning - well, let me die sharing joy and laughter with the world.'

"I wouldn't say I was courting death, but when I got back I found out the girls in the juvenile detention center where I sometimes work made a bet with the boys. They bet that I would come back alive, but the boys bet that I would not come back. I didn't know about that until I returned to New York City. I understand that nobody owns his or her next breath, but going to Israel just felt good."

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