

Surely, you Jest!

A TOP HAT, A WAISTCOAT, AND A LITTLE RED NOSE:
SEAN MICHAEL CLOWNS AROUND ON THE DANFORTH

WORDS KATRINA PIDEK PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL FEGAN

"In clowning there is a saying that you have to get off to get your audience off," Sean Michael, 30, says with a smile. "My way of thinking in any performance is that there is a fun ball in the room and the audience has it up in the air already; they've paid, sat down, and are invested in the show. The role of the clown is to come out looking neat, with a little red nose on, and just keep the ball in the air!" As a recent recipient of the Mark Purvis bursary for clowning, Sean is not your average clown. He performs his cheeky persona "Smith" in a monthly show that has found its home at the Black Swan Tavern: a music and comedy club that has attracted live-entertainment lovers for the past 30 years. The appropriately titled "Red Nose District" (a night jam-packed with clowns, physical comedy, buffoonery, mime, commedia and vaudeville) is an evening of hijinks and hilarity that allows novice and veteran talents alike to showcase new material. Upstairs, the tavern has an intimate atmosphere with comfy leather chairs and a warm glow that illuminates the stage. "The Red Nose District is a great event because the audience is so supportive — the night has a real jammy feel to it," Sean describes. "You get to know the clowns, you get to drink, and you get to talk back."

Unlike other forms of theatre, clowns perform without the invisible "fourth wall" that separates the world of the performer from that of their audience. This means that the performers acknowledge and speak directly to their crowd. "Without this imaginary divider, the audience is not pretending we don't see them and we don't pretend there is no audience," Sean explains. This direct connection allows for all kinds of interesting experimentations such as manipulating societal conventions or rendering them utterly absurd. Audience participation is not only encouraged but also inevitable. Brash, cunning, and risqué, this is not the mild-mannered clown show you'd expect to see at a child's birthday party.



Expanding on this performer-audience relationship, Sean illustrates one of his acts:

"I WALK ON STAGE WITH SOMETHING AWESOME IN MY HANDS THAT I'M REALLY EXCITED ABOUT. WHILE I'M ENGAGING WITH THE CROWD, I HAND IT TO AN AUDIENCE MEMBER. I TURN AROUND AND — IT'S GONE! OF COURSE, THIS POOR AUDIENCE MEMBER HAS NO IDEA WHAT JUST HAPPENED. I CLIMB ALL THROUGH THE AUDIENCE LOOKING FOR THIS THING AND GET DISTRACTED ALONG THE WAY. I GO THROUGH PEOPLE'S PURSES AND BACKPACKS AND BAGS; I READ THEIR NOTEBOOKS, I DRINK THEIR BEERS, I SMELL THEM! I GET AS INTIMATE AS I THINK THEY'RE INTERESTED IN GETTING. IT SOUNDS MORE INTIMIDATING THAT IT ACTUALLY IS."

And since a clown is always acknowledging the presence of the audience, and every audience is different, every performance is a little bit different too.

Sean's first exposure to clowning was introduced during a viewing of Cirque du Soleil's Quidam — a thrilling combination of acrobatic artistry, technical expertise, extravagant design and exceptional musical performances. "There was this one clown who had an MC role and was really engaging with the audience, leaning up into people's faces and such. He wore a bow tie and had this great haircut: everything was shaved off except a little tuft at the front," he reminisces. "I was so in love with this clown that I even took a picture of him to the hairdresser in the mall, and the guy gave me this haircut."



He shaved everything off and all I had left was this little tuft, just before I made my debut at my new high school!" he jokes. Sean nostalgically recalls his teenage years when a perceptive teacher encouraged him to join the improvisation club, further fostering his love for comedy and performance. He eventually discovered the vaudeville movement in Toronto at events like Mysterion's Incredible Mini Burlesque Show and Lunacy Cabaret.

Today, Sean often hosts Lunacy Cabaret — classifying itself as the "Circus Without Borders," the largest and longest running underground cabaret in North America. This wildly popular, one-of-a-kind, and volunteer-run show is a no-holds-barred evening of vaudeville, hosting a variety of live clowning, comedy, and multi-media. "There is strong neo-vaudeville, cabaret and burlesque renaissance happening all over the city, and I'm proud to be part of it."

Other members of Toronto's vaudeville revival and clown ecosystem include Sean's mentor and clowning veteran Dave McKay, who performs as the debauched "Sketchy" at "Red Nose District" shows. According to McKay, "Sketchy" is "based on those guys you see at the end of the party or at closing time who stumble around on various substances failing to find their lost centre of balance." Allan Turner, who performs as the zombified "Jean-Paul Mullet" and hosts "Mullet's Night Show," is another inspiration for Sean and a monthly draw of audiences to the Black Swan Tavern. Performing as Mullet, Turner recently headlined in New York City, where he packed the house at one of Manhattan's top comedy clubs, The PIT.

Beyond the Danforth there exists a plethora of opportunities to explore the craft, with classes like Sketchy & Fessos' Crash Course in Vaudeville and Mullet's Make-a-Scene Masterclass, offered at the Centre of Gravity Circus. But what is the best way to get initiated to clowning? "Just come to a show!" Sean encourages.

- THE RED NOSE DISTRICT IS THE LAST THURSDAY OF EVERY MONTH AT THE BLACK SWAN TAVERN, LOCATED AT 154 DANFORTH AVENUE ON THE 2ND FLOOR (\$10).

- MULLET'S NIGHT SHOW IS THE SECOND THURSDAY OF EVERY MONTH, ALSO LOCATED AT THE BLACK SWAN TAVERN (PWYC).

- LUNACY CABARET SHOWS TAKE PLACE MONTHLY AT THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY CIRCUS, LOCATED AT 1300 GERRARD STREET EAST (\$20 ADVANCE TICKETS).

- BE SURE TO CHECK WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/GROUPS/TORONTOCLOWN/ FOR UPCOMING EVENTS AND UP TO DATE SHOW TIMES.

