

Gigs at worldwide festivals support entertainerâ??s humanitarian work: â??Clowns without Bordersâ?? and the â??Medical Clown Projectâ??

Description

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Nurses smile and wave as a slim man in an oversized coat strides briskly past them. His wiry hair sticks out, Bozo-like from under his floppy hat, a ukulele is slung over his shoulder and heâ??s brandishing a gigantic paper sunflower. His nose is bright red and shiny over his KN95 mask.

Popping into an elderly patientâ??s dim room at the San Francisco Campus for Jewish Living, he softly calls, â??Hello, hello, so good to see you again.â?• Doffing his hat, he says, â??Shall I put my hat back on?â?• then deftly rolls it down his leg to his foot and kicks it back onto to his head. â??How do I look now? Better?â?• He gambols around the tiny room waving the sunflower, a cascade of confetti petals pouring out onto the floor. â??Sometimes I can balance a flower on my nose,â?• he says, â??itâ??s not easy.â?•

A badge on his white coat reads â??MEDICAL CLOWN. â??

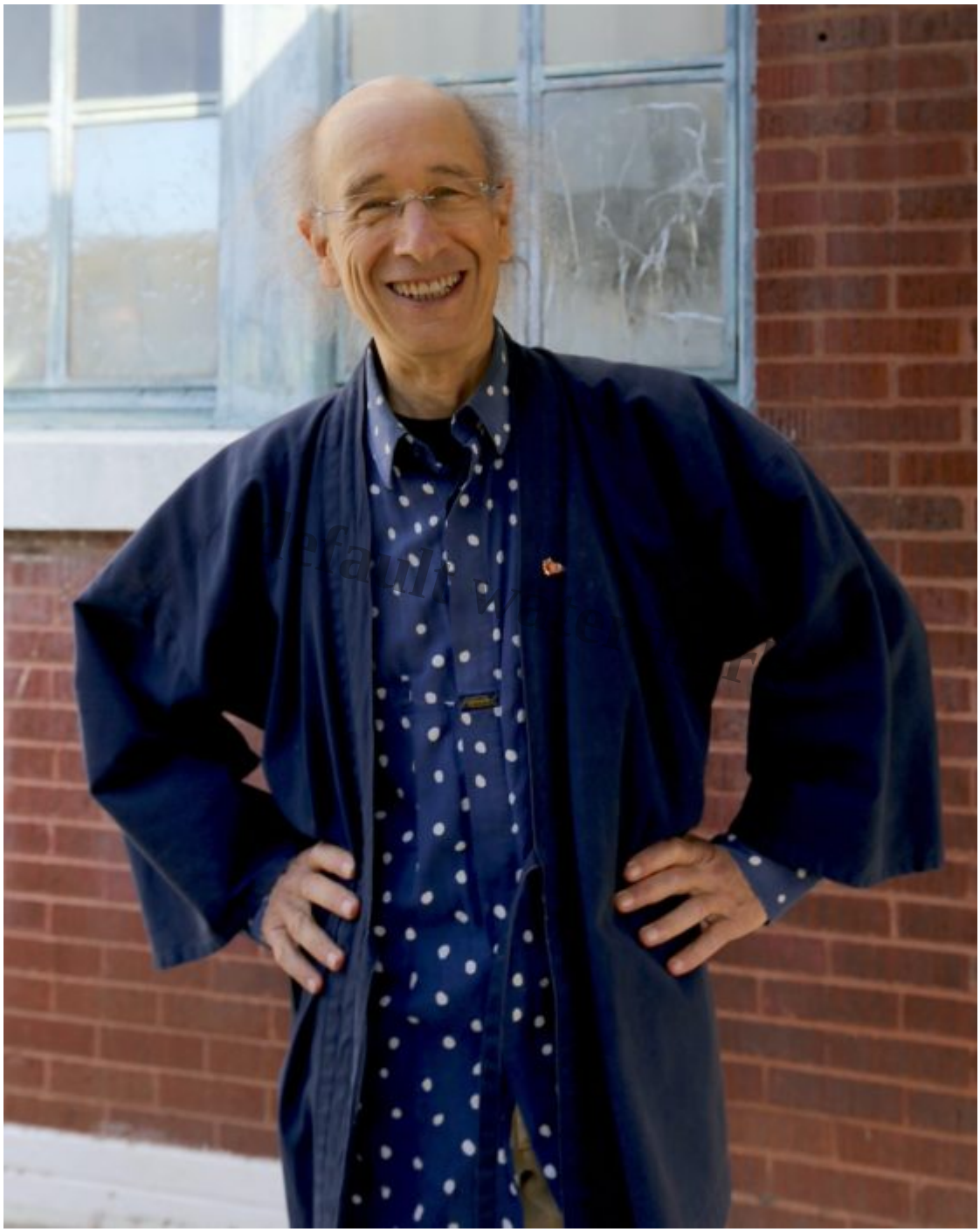


Moshe Cohen, team lead, and Calvin Ku, artistic director, for the Medical Clown Project after a recent performance at the Campus for Jewish Living. (Photo by Robin Evans)

Moshe Cohen, aka Mr. Yoowho, visits patients at this skilled nursing and residential facility every two weeks. Heâ??s part of the Medical Clown Project, which sends its specially trained clowns to the Campus for Jewish Living, Laguna Honda Hospital, UCSF Benioff Childrenâ??s Hospital, and California Pacific Medical Center.

Cohen takes out his ukelele and sings, â??When youâ??re smiling, when youâ??re smiling, the whole world smiles with you.â?• A nursing assistant, fixing the patientâ??s bedding, hums along.

â??Thatâ??s so nice, so good to see you again,â?• said the man in bed, smiling widely, â??thanks for coming.â?• Bowing farewell, Cohen then waltzes out into the corridor and into a bright sunny activity room.



Moshe Cohen has been bringing laughter into places itâ??s most needed for more than 40 years, from war zones to homeless camps to hospital rooms. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

Skip, donâ??t walk

A lithe and slender 67, Cohen never seems to just walk; he skips, hops, and dances his way along. He is soon encircled by six women residents, in wheelchairs or walkers.

Greeting each by name â?? â??Hello, Alice, so good to see you.â?• â?? he proceeds to pull quarters out of their ears and juggle bright red and yellow cellophane bags. He moves gracefully, engaging them individually with a luminous smile and direct but kind gaze. â??You make me very happy,â?• says Alice as he wraps up with a sprightly version of â??Somewhere over the Rainbowâ?• on his ukulele.

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Cohen has been with the Medical Clown Project since 2018 but has entertained the world over for 40 years. Heâ??s juggled, joked, sung, danced, and clowned, bringing â??laughter into places where it was most needed,â?• he said.



Cohen serenades one of the residents at the Campus for Jewish Living. (Photo by Robin Evans)

Heâ??s traveled to war zones and refugee camps as a member of Clowns Without Borders. He has entertained homeless children in Capetown, South Africa, and displaced Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas, Mexico. _

He was hooked after his first trip, to Croatia in 1994, when he traveled with the French Clowns Without Borders to perform for Bosnian refugees and other internally displaced people. They did eight shows in Zagreb and Srebrenica.

Over the past 25 years, he has given more than 2,000 performances in more than 30 countries, including in Latin America, South Africa, Nepal, and Myanmar.

He has also worked the street theater festival circuits in Montreal, Paris, Rome, Berlin, and Madrid. Additionally, he teaches, leading workshops in â??clownâ?• at Zen centers, colleges, community centers, and summer camps.

Asked how his upbringing connects to his profession, he replied, â??Well, letâ??s say a life in theatre was not in the cards.â?•

High school in Belgium

Raised in Los Angeles, the son of an aerospace engineer and a homemaker, he never studied acting, music, or dance. But when his fatherâ??s job took the family to Europe for several years, Cohen was drafted, as a high school junior at a wealthy private high school in Belgium, to perform in â??Fiddler on the Roof.*â?•* â??Hey, they needed someone who spoke a little Hebrew, but I was terrible.â?• He did learn fluent French, which has been invaluable for his international performances.

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Cohen banters with Community Enrichment Manager Alla Surkis and a resident at the Campus for Jewish Living. (Photo by Robin Evans)

Cohen attended the University of California-Davis, graduating in 1978 with a degree in agricultural economics and business. His older brother taught him to juggle, and he practiced a bit in college. Attracted by San Franciscoâ??s European feel, he moved here in 1979, doing odd jobs until he found work at the Pacific Stock Exchange. â??It was a peon job, a clerk job, but the hours were great, my rent was $325, and I practiced juggling on my breaks.â?•

In the summer of â??81, he quit and went to Europe to visit places and friends heâ??d known as a teen. In the French alpine tourist town of Annecy, his friends pushed him to do a show on the street. â??I just played around. I mean, totally untrained theatrically, but I got the bug.â?•

He attended the annual European juggling festival in London, then visited a friend in Madrid, who encouraged him to perform on the streets there, gifting him three words in Spanish: â??Eso digo yo!â?•

(Thatâ??s what I say!) â??I juggled and joked around and someone, usually a guy, would be egging me on and I would shout back, â??Eso Digo Yo!â?? It was pure play. I got a lot of laughs. â??

He came home broke, worked for Merrill Lynch for a bit, and in 1983 drove his car across the country to Montreal, because â??they speak French, I speak French, I wanted to do my show in French and Iâ??d been practicing. I was more polished.â?•

An â??amuseur publiqueâ??

Cohen didnâ??t think of himself as a clown at the time but rather as an â??*amuseur publiqueâ?•â??* public entertainer in French. He dates his career from that â??83 Montreal summer when after a solo performance, he was approached by a man who asked if he wanted a job. He was offered a salary, per diem, and housing for two summers, working big street theater festivals in Canada.

One was the Winnipeg Childrenâ??s Theatre Festival, where he said, his goal was to â??be funnyâ?• but also â??to create a sense of no walls, of unity, of â??we are in this moment together,â?? you and the audience, and itâ??s delicious and never going to happen again.â??

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But being funny is not always so easy in a different culture.



Cohen, who has performed around the world, and when cultural differences get in the way of laughs, he said, slapstick usually works. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

On his first trip to Chiapas, none of the kids laughed. â??I didnâ??t have their context,â?• he recalls, â??These kids had never seen television or a movie or a performer, and I couldnâ??t get them laughing at all.â?•

Finally, he got a laugh when his juggling balls, slippery in the heat, kept falling. â??When I got frustrated, I banged my fists against the wallâ?• and pretended to hurt his hands. â??That is when they started chuckling at my frustration and mock anger, I could say that was the first time I really clowned.â?•

Eventually, paid professional work at Canadian and European summer festivals gave him a stable income and the ability to go on humanitarian missions. â??The street festival world offered such great opportunities: well-paid gigs, enthusiastic family audiences, an amazing community of artists and a sense of purpose as an artist.â?•

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Training with the best

And all through the mid 80â??s he developed his craft, taking workshops with some of the best in the theatrical and clowning business: Sigfrido Aguilar, the founder of the first school of miming, clowning, and movement in Mexico; famed Canadian clown Richard Pochinko, and Monika Pagneux, one of Europeâ??s leading exponents of movement in theater. â??She unknotted me,â?• Cohen said.

He wintered in San Francisco, his home base, and Mexico.



Cohen makes a point of stopping to engage with each resident. (Photo by Robin Evans)

In 1993, he moved into an artistsâ?? live-work space in San Franciscoâ??s Mission District: Developing Environments.

This affordable harbor in San Francisco allowed him to pursue a career as an artist.

He performed internationally through 2001, and gradually transitioned to teaching workshops in clown and theater schools and spiritual retreat centers. He also has been teaching since â??84 at Wavy Gravyâ??s Camp Winnarainbow in Mendocino.

During Covid, Cohen took to doing an online workshop with about 10 to 20 participants between San Francisco and Europe. Called â??Levity Pause,â?• they met weekly to de-stress and connect.

But with the pandemic over, heâ??s back in action, and just this September traveled to The Netherlands and Austria to teach two workshops in what he calls â??sacred mischief,â?• which has been and still is his lifeâ??s pursuit.

He lives by the words of Leris Colombaioni, one of Italyâ??s commedia dellâ??arte performers: â??If after two days, the audience has forgotten your show, then you are wasting your time because you are not touching their hearts.â?•

Says Cohen: â??We have five senses, theoretically, but then there is the sixth: the sense of humor. That falls on the intuitive side if you want to open up a heart.â?•

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1. All Posts

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