

Fite, who used to have a partnership at The Clown Company, now works on his own without the business name and holds another job as an employment training specialist.

As a child, Fite was not interested in clowns and had never been to the circus, he said.

"When I grew up, my parents were never (interested) in the circus," Fite said. "I always liked to watch clowns on TV, though, when they were much more popular."

Fite liked performers such as Red Skelton, Emmett Kelley and others who used juggling, theatre and stand-up comedy in their acts, he said.

"I always liked people who incorporated clowning into what they did," Fite said.

"Clowning to me takes in so many dimensions," he said. "It's not mime, it's not acting, it's not magic, but it draws on all of those things."

Although there are no guidelines about body type, gender or personality that makes a clown good at his or her profession, clowns must not be dirty, hurtful or negative, Fite said.

"A clown is a fantasy character," Jones said. "Even on the street, a clown is still kind of a make-believe person. Anything you do to detract from that, such as smoking, drinking or eating, you shouldn't do."

"It's what you are inside... I look for that inner kind of thing from a clown," Fite said. "If you don't have the stuff, it shows."

"You have to be willing to give, because most of the work you do you have to give away," Jones said.

Each clown is original, Fite said, because each chooses its own personality, costume and face makeup.

Fite's character, Zappi the Clown, creates balloon animals, juggles, pantomimes and performs magic.

"My character tends to be kind of goofy anyway, so he doesn't always do everything right," he said.

Fite's act is basically the same for each performance, but he incorporates different things for different audiences, he said. Three-year-old children, for example, like a lot of physical slapstick comedy and animated gestures from a clown; older children like juggling and magic, and families like acts



Photo by Michael Wilhelm

Stephie the Clown, also known as Stephen Jones, performs at a birthday party at the Waldorf School.

that let them interact with one another, he said.

"I do a little of everything...but I'm not a magical clown. I try to draw from a lot so it gives me a lot of flexibility," Fite said.

Jones' character, Stephie the Clown, also creates balloon animals, performs magic and tells stories in his act.

The key to making people laugh is in a clown's character, Fite said. Zappi the Clown can capture an audience by exaggerating things, by taking simple things and making them complicated, by playing on words and by poking fun at himself and other people, he said.

"I'd like to tape a birthday party once," Fite said. "Not for the memory or anything, but because I get some of the funniest lines from kids...you can't upstage them — you really can't."

Stephie is a sad-faced clown, and although Jones has never broken his character, it is sometimes hard to stay sad when working with children, he said.

"It's those innocent, off-the-wall things that kids say that really make you almost lose it," Jones said.

There have been changes in clowns and in their acts over the years, Fite said. Historically, clowns were violent and would often imitate drunk people, the reason for the typical "white-faced, red-nosed" clown, he said.

This, as well as the "three stooges-type stuff," is not funny any more, and clowns are now typically less violent, Fite said.

The appearance of clowns has changed a lot over the centuries, Jones said. Costumes used to be intricate and detailed, "almost a work of art," he said.

"Today people are very relaxed about the art...the tradition of costuming has really come down," Jones said.

Makeup, however, has become much more precise and detailed, he said.

Clowns also have more variety in their acts these days, Fite said. Just as the performances of singers, musicians and actors have become more in-depth with the help of technology, so have the performances of clowns, he said.

"Clowns went along that same rope...they do all kinds of things now," Fite said.

People also are more relaxed about the definition of a clown, Jones said. Although a real

clown is someone with formal training and experience, many people consider a clown someone in funny clothes and a painted face, he said.

"I consider clowning an art form, and some people consider it goofing off," Jones said.

There are a few drawbacks to being a clown, Fite said, including constantly putting on makeup. "Sometimes I get tired of makeup...I'd rather just take a nap."

"There are some societal things I don't like, like the way people interpret clowns," Fite said. "They think clowns are just these guys who don't really have any talent. There tends to be a misconception there."

Many people don't see clowns as legitimate performers, he said.

"There's a lot of cynical people around," Jones said. "I don't like it when people think you're only in it for the money."

Because Fite always has enjoyed the stage, he prefers stage clowning to street clowning, he said.

"If I was a little more of a risk-taker, I might take this makeup off and do a little more traditional theatre," Fite said.

Jones often works for tips on weekends at one of three Pietro's Pizza restaurants, said Tom Morin, manager on duty at the Franklin Boulevard Pietro's.

The exposure at the restaurant helps Jones' business as well as attracting children to the establishment, Morin said. "You'd be surprised — the adults really like him too," he said.

Jones entertains customers by making balloon animals, which is an attraction for the children along with the merry-go-round and video games, Morin said.

"We're one of the more family-oriented restaurants in town," he said.

Geraldine Runey recently threw a birthday party for her 5-year-old son and hired Fite to entertain the children, she said.

"I wanted to do something different, and I figured it would be something that he would remember for a while," Runey said.

Fite made balloon animals, juggled and performed magic tricks for the children.

"Most of the kids were from 4 to 7 years old, so they like that kind of humor," she said. "They really go for that."

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