

le clique

By Michele Reed

PHOTOS BY STEVE CRECELIUS

clicks with party crowd



There's a little kid inside everyone. Former teacher **Stu Feinstein '63** has made it his life's work to bring some of the magic and wonder of childhood to audiences all over the world.

A self-styled Peter Pan, the founder and chief fantasy-maker at Le Clique has been helping people let go and experience wonder at everything from family weddings and bar mitzvahs to gala charity balls replete with celebrities since 1979.

Ironically, it was a little child who inadvertently inspired Feinstein's business. During his 20-year career as a teacher, Feinstein was known for his avant-garde teaching style: a classroom decorated like a living room with desks only for those who didn't live up to academic contracts, and plenty of time spent sitting on the floor sharing thoughts and ideas.

At one of those floor sessions, the young teacher, looking for ways to help support his family, asked his class for ideas to make money.

One little boy, Lionel, would inspire his teacher to a whole new career. "With a 'La Gioconda' smile, Lionel looked at me and looked away again, and then he said, 'You know what you could do? Make a circus, invite the people and keep the money,'" relates Feinstein with a chuckle.

"That was the birth-seed of Le Clique," says Feinstein. "My mind full of fantasy, I started to create parties in New York City."



'once upon a time . . .'

It's a fairy tale story of a teacher, setting out on a new life, knowing no rules, with no fear.

Stu and his wife, Marlene, started making and promoting parties in New York's big discotheques during the last three years of the '70s.

For Le Clique, Feinstein gathered street performers. "They were my people; I wanted my circus to be fun," he says.

Those attending the parties were intrigued. They started asking who was behind the fun and seeking Feinstein out to create parties for them.

"People started calling and asking, 'Can you make my party colorful and

fun?' 'Bring Le Clique to my party,'" he recalls. "And that's when we started staging parties for other people."

Le Clique was one of the only companies of its kind at the time, according to Feinstein.

This party pioneer literally changed the face of the industry.

"We took a look at the format of a party and broke down the walls," Feinstein recalls. "There was no longer a proscenium between the stage and the audience. The world is theatre and the ballroom is our theatre."

As the company matured, they used more production, choreography, costumes and lighting. Feinstein spent his time harnessing the power of theatrics, understanding costumes and production to create magical, themed events.

"It was never a show but all the elements that would make a great show were there," Feinstein says.

On the other hand, those elements never dominated — they never stopped the action. It was a lesson learned in the discotheques of the '70s: Never stop the party.

"Our mantra was, 'Let's make a seamless explosion of fun,'" says Feinstein. "We temper it so that people can eat and talk, but all of a sudden the merriment begins again."

It perfectly matched his classroom philosophy: Always look for a surprise. Never be predictable.

In fact, Feinstein says it's easy for him to bounce back between classroom and business: It's one and the same.

"It's hard for me to make the delineation," he says. "As a teacher I felt that I was in some sort of wonderful laboratory — a place with wonderful, beautiful young minds and young children with vivid imaginations and unbridled passion, once you allowed them to express it."

Fantasy — the key to his successful party business — is also key to the world of childhood, he points out. "Fantasy comes naturally for children — it's easy for them to believe in Santa and Donald Duck . . . because they live in the now, in the moment."

But in the grown-up world, fantasy is serious business, says Feinstein. He points out comedians, who might spend months perfecting a 30-second routine to achieve one laugh.

"You are playing with people's imagination, playing with their spirit," Feinstein acknowledges. "You have a great responsibility."

As it is spontaneous for children to let go and experience fantasy, Feinstein's challenge is to create an atmosphere in which his party-going adults feel comfortable enough to do just that. "Where is the child in that grey-haired man or in that woman? Find that child and let them come out and play."



beauty in mayhem

His tools: Mayhem and color. Once they get loose, the imagination and spirit of the people follow suit.

His challenge: How to work fantasy to trigger their release, their abandon to it.

"I always thought it very beautiful," says Feinstein. "Fantasy allows magical things to take place: It allows people who might not laugh to laugh, to get up on the dance floor and dance, and to give their wife extra hugs."

He concedes that a lot of elements create fantasy. "It's a big, wide universe. If you are not careful, it becomes contrived," says Feinstein. "It's like walking a fine gossamer thread: How do you make it fun and not predictable? Not contrived? Keep fooling them."

Since a lot of what he works with is visual, Feinstein says, the reaction to it is universal. "All races, all religions, people from all over the world find the mischief to be fun, the mayhem to be fun," he says.

Often, he feels like an orchestra conductor, keeping all the parts and instruments in sync to create a beautiful whole.

It's not a bad analogy — while doing a party, Feinstein is literally running the show. Most of the time, he doesn't even need to look at a watch. He just instinctively knows where they are in the party flow.

He builds flexibility into the game plan, but make no mistake: It is a game plan. Feinstein feels too much respon-

"You invite the guests. Le Clique will dazzle them," is Feinstein's motto. Some of the themes used to keep dazzling guests of the annual National Jewish Hospital gala were, clockwise from left, "Hurray for Hollywood" in 2008; "Red Hot Rio" in 2006 and "Moulin Rouge" in 2007. The 2009 edition of the NJH gala was "Winter Wonderland."

sibility to let things just run amok, any more than he would in the classroom.

As a teacher, he knew he held a very powerful position. "Anything I say could shape them for a lifetime," he says.

career takes shape at Oswego

The classroom was certainly a training ground for the party planner. "A lot of being onstage in a classroom has enabled me to be on stage in a ballroom," he concedes.

And the training ground for the teacher was SUNY Oswego.

Ironically, his biggest influence at Oswego was a teacher whose methods were diametrically opposed to his. **Dr. Constance Holmes Bond '51** was his mentor in the Campus School. But while she ran a tight ship, with desks in rows and traditional pedagogy, Feinstein adhered to the more open style of a 1960s classroom.

He used a Skinnerian system of rewards and consequences. Students had contracts to fulfill each week, and on Friday they opened their businesses to trade with the rewards they earned for

good work and behavior.

For all the difference in their styles, he took away a great life lesson from Bond. "Her ability to look a kid in the eye and create a bond between her and the kids: That's what really inspired me," he says.

"It had nothing to do with the books, the chairs, the walls. It was something to do with the person.

"Once that bond is made, all good things can happen. It's when the magic starts to happen."

The thread continues, as Feinstein, the father of four, passes on his classroom philosophy to his daughter Jodi, who is a teacher. "Who I stood for — emotionally, intellectually, etc. — in the classroom is being carried on by my daughter," he says. "We will talk about a certain child, how to discover how to let that child become free."

Feinstein taught for about 20 years, and started his company while he was still teaching.

He admits that it was nothing for him to be up until 3 a.m. working a party, and then return to the classroom later that morning.

"[Teaching] was not work to me — it was play, my passion, who I was," he says. "If you do what you love, you don't really work, you play and live out your passion."

Not only was Oswego his training ground for the classroom and later business career, it was the place where he met some of the greatest friends of his life: **Danny Davis '63, Arthur Raphael '62 and Ken Auletta '63.**

"Those guys are so special and meaningful. We stay in contact and rendezvous every so often," Feinstein says. "Within a minute, it seems the years disappear and we are right back to where we were to each other at that moment in time at Oswego."

art of the family

Feinstein cherishes the relationships made in his business as well, citing as a great perk the joy he brings to generations of families.

He relates a recent call from a young woman. He had planned her bat mitzvah and her wedding. Now she wanted him to plan her son's upcoming bar mitzvah.

Feinstein also relishes the good he is able to do through his work, such as the annual charity gala he plans for the National Jewish Hospital, raising enormous sums to support research. "It's a very serious side to what I do that enabled me to leave the classroom," he says.

Acknowledging that the current economy makes party planners rethink what is appropriate or tasteful, he still finds a need for the magic he can create.

"People will want to go to a party and for three or four hours we will give them some relief, create a world in that ballroom or tent, and let them have a great time," he says.

The world is a special place for Feinstein. "Anything is possible in this great world," he says. "You just have to dare to dream."

For this dreamer and magician, whose biggest heroes are Willy Wonka and Ferdinand the Bull who learned to stop and smell the flowers, the best is yet to come. "I've got more to do," Feinstein assures. "As long as Cinderella wants to dance, I'll keep the music playing." ●

tips for planning a great party

By Stu Feinstein '63

The great party is not an accident, but rather the product of passion and vision. The artistic process demands creativity, insight, discipline, patience and a relentless pursuit of excellence.

No matter the size or purpose of the party, the process is the same. The goal is to create an event with its own imprint of individuality and originality that must always attempt to exceed the expectations of the guests.

Establish a Realistic Budget

The first and most important step to take in planning a party is to establish your budget. It will ultimately control much of your decision-making and remove frustration from the creative process.

Establish Your Guest List

The success of any party rests in the hands of your guests. The actual number may eventually vary a bit, but get a handle on this count from the start as it impacts several other aspects of decision-making.

It is your guests who bring their love and energy to the party. It is your job to ignite their participation, for they are the heartbeat of the experience.

Find a Place

Now it's time to find a place to have the party. Depending upon the purpose of the party and its size, go out and see what suits your fancy.

Don't be afraid to think out of the box because the environment you select is a hidden weapon of great strength. For example, when I made several personal parties for my children, I wanted a club atmosphere. Rather than transforming a ballroom, I simply utilized an existing "club" where all the lighting and DJ were part of the package. There was no need to spend money on décor as I wanted to stimulate an interactive experience where children and adults could share a common adventure.

This approach may not work for a wedding or charity gala, but always seek a facility which offers some inherent perks.

Music . . . The Soul of the Party

The most important ingredient is your music, so don't compromise.

This is a very personal choice. Don't rely on a Web site or referral. Meet your

bandleader or DJ. Better yet, try to see them in action.

The quality of music will make or break the success of your party. No one ever left a party and said it was great because of a centerpiece or an elaborate dessert. It's always about a special connection that music stimulates in the imagination of each guest. It's the ritual that ignites spirit.



Stu Feinstein '63

KENNETH APPELBAUM

Selecting Vendors — Tricky Business

The selection of other vendors such as décor, photography, video and related specialists should be approached with care and always fit within your budget.

Every specialist has many different options and in a difficult economy, vendors will be more flexible than ever. But "quality is quality," so the integrity of each element must always be in your thinking.

Cheaper is not better. It's just cheaper. However, a smart shopper and a clever vendor usually can find a comfortable middle ground to forge a meaningful relationship.

The Party Planner . . .

The Icing On The Cake

If your budget permits, a party planner is a great idea. The party planner becomes your advocate and your right arm in all decision-making.

A smart party planner will save you money, time and frustration, and remove the pressure that always exists at the event.

Your best approach is to pay the planner a flat fee and let them do what they do best. The ability to have an effective sounding board 24/7 is invaluable.

Creating a great party is not as easy as it seems, and having a singular voice representing your best interests at all times is a potent ace up your sleeve!

Have Fun . . . It's a Party!

Remember to have fun as you plan your party. A party is a celebration of life . . . It's about dreams and making them come true! ●