

Youssou who?

Youssou N'Dour may need an interpreter for interviews, but that's not the case when he opens his mouth to sing. The language barriers disappear. Meet this Senegese singer who is making a name for himself and his music in this country on Page 3D.

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Photos by JIM JAGOFF/staff photographer

Stan Takarz donned his best cap, fanciest shoes and brightest nose before heading out for the Clown College auditions. At age 65, the West Bloomfield resident is ready for a new career.

Bring on the

CLOWNS

By LeAnne Rogers
staff writer

The circus evokes a lot of images, colorful, sparkling costumes, brassy music, popcorn, animals and especially those people in baggy clothes and big shoes.

People who dream of hitting the road as circus clowns had a chance to audition for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Clown College Thursday at Joe Louis Arena.

"I want to run away with the circus," said Stan Takarz, a 65-year-old West Bloomfield resident, who auditioned in full clown regalia.

No prior experience in clowning is needed, although applicants are expected to demonstrate serious motivation about a career as a clown.

"We look for desire foremost in the audition," said Peggy Pozdol, a former Birmingham resident in her third year with the circus. "We look for physical comedy, people who can express themselves physically. We teach them the other skills."

When asked about why they wish to become clowns, the auditioners almost uniformly responded that they wanted to make people laugh.

"I want to entertain people and make them laugh," said Jason Scott, 17, of Southfield. "I want to be a clown."

Adam Leichtman, 18, of West Bloomfield, hopes to further his performing career through clowning.

"BASCALLY, I read in the paper about auditions. I had been doing theater in high school and I hope to eventually be on Broadway," said Leichtman, who will be attending Wayne State University.

For Takarz, a retired carpenter and builder, clowning is not the means to an end.

"I've been clowning since 1952. I met Emmett Kelly when I got out of the Navy in 1952," he said. "I'm an Alhambra clown. I'm in all the parades in West Bloomfield."

After attending three clown camps, Takarz said he decided to audition for clown college, having retired a year ago.

"My wife and family love support me. They love it. My wife pushes me out the door to do it," he said.

Boss clown Christopher Hudert, a native of Richmond, Va., put clown hopefuls through their paces in the third circus ring on the floor of Joe Louis Arena.



Jason Scott of Southfield showed his enthusiasm during the warm-up exercises at the audition.

After some warm-up exercises, the group of men and women pretended to be walking on a tight wire, moving to music only they could hear and getting caught imitating an animal during a visit to the zoo.

"Let me suggest that you aren't watching monkeys at the zoo; that is pretty common in the audition," Hudert said.

IN ANOTHER exercise, the auditioners were to react to standing on something extremely hot, deciding whether it was a quick realization or the classic slow burn.

If they had guessed before, Hudert makes it crystal clear, subtlety is not in a circus clown's vocabulary.

"You communicate with body movement that is large," he said. "People don't need to hear you, but they need to see you."

Telling the group to run lightly in place, Hudert had them pick up the pace, eventually calling for an exaggerated head back, high stepping clown run. "It's like a bear is chasing you," he said, demonstrating the move.

Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey clowns assist with the audition, demonstrating a time-honored gag about a giant sandwich, excessive pepper and inevitable sneezes.

"This gag has been around forever and three years before that," said Hudert. "It's called the Dagwood Sandwich."

Clowns man a video camcorder to record the auditions, held in each city on the circus tour, for later review by the clown college staff. Applicants will be notified in June or July whether they have been accepted into the rigorous 10-week program, held annually in Venice, Fla.

"IT'S LIKE 10 weeks of circus boot camp," said Kevin Carr, a former Farmington Hills resident and member of the Clown College class of 1989.

At 19, Carr is in his first year touring with the circus, having been accepted to clown college after high school.

"I had no immediate plans after graduation. I had been active in theater and on the stage in high school," he said. "In clown college, they taught me about physical comedy."

The final examination for clown college is a show, attended by clown college president and Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus head Kenneth Feld. And for a select group of graduating clowns, contracts are offered with the circus.

For Pozdol, a Marlan High School graduate, working as a circus clown combines her favorite things in life.

"I get to travel and perform... and I get paid for it," said Pozdol, 28, in her third year with the circus. "I like working with people. I studied to be an expressive therapist."

"When she first joined the circus, Pozdol said she really didn't know what to expect.

"Anything I thought it would be, it has been and more," she said. "It's like a working vacation."

WHILE ON tour 11 months each year like other circus staff, the clowns take their homes along with them.

"We sleep on the circus train. Everything goes on the circus train, the equipment trailers, the animals, everyone who works with the show," said Carr. "I have my own room and I'm very comfortable. It is difficult not being in one place very long."

Contracts are offered annually, so Pozdol said she can't be sure how long she will be with the circus.

"You take it year-to-year under the contract," she said.



Clown hopefuls Carol Crooks of Windsor and Bob Ammon of Taylor do their best during auditions for the Clown College.