

# LORENZO PISONI

## My Father the Clown

In a new solo work,  
a "circus kid" embraces  
his colorful past

BY STUART MILLER

Lorenzo Pisoni in *Humor Abuse*, produced by Manhattan Theatre Club.

**LORENZO PISONI WANTED A FRESH START, SO** he ran away from the circus to join the real world.

Pisoni had performed since age two, sometimes in clown make-up or a gorilla suit, in San Francisco's celebrated Pickle Family Circus, co-founded by his parents Larry and Peggy. Lorenzo's dad and his fellow clowns Bill Irwin and Geoff Hoyle were circus and new-vaudeville legends.

But after being that "circus kid" in high school, Pisoni journeyed 3,000 miles away for college, telling no one at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., about his secret juggling, acrobatic, clowning identity. "I just wanted to be a normal person," says the performer, now 32 and starring in an autobiographical solo show called *Humor Abuse*, running through April 12 at Manhattan Theatre Club. "I always wanted to be taken seriously."

One day at Vassar, Pisoni's two roommates told him he'd had a call. They looked perplexed. On the answering machine, a woman said, "I just wanted to know if you'd like to be a ringmaster for the show I'm doing in Japan."

Pisoni reluctantly confessed his background. "They didn't believe me. So I went outside and did a back-flip."

Still, he postponed coming all the way out of the clown closet until Geoff Hoyle's son Jonah joined him at Vassar and they went public, creating a variety show (which debuted the title *Humor Abuse*) that tossed in a couple of anecdotes about being raised by clowns. "I had to exorcise a few things," Pisoni reasons.

He began performing as ringmaster for Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas, but college had "expanded my brain to what was out there," Pisoni says, and he was contemplating a fresh start. "Bill Irwin said, 'If you want to make money

go to L.A. If you want to be an actor, come to New York.'"

Pisoni was reluctantly negotiating his next circus contract when he got a phone call from a Vassar friend, Erica Schmidt. She was directing *Romeo and Juliet*, with some former classmates, in an outdoor lot in the East Village...for no money.

Pisoni took the leap. He blew his lines in his Shakespearean debut, but plowed ahead, stumbling into what amounted to a living master class in the Bard: In the years from 1999 to 2004, he appeared in *The Tempest*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Henry IV*, working again with Schmidt but also with big-league directors Sir Peter Hall, Emily Mann and Jack O'Brien, and actors like Brian Murray, Kevin Kline and Sam Waterston.

Circus performance had come naturally—he'd grown up backstage watching his father, Irwin and Hoyle developing and perfecting material. But acting took time. "At first I thought I had to *do* stuff, 'put on a show,'" he says. He also broke the habit of "moving a certain way every night till each scene becomes like a dance," which makes circus acts look polished but dramatic plays look artificial.

Although Pisoni followed his immersion in Shakespeare with a few years in Los Angeles ("trying to sell out," he deadpans), he returned east because "New York is home." Recent roles have taken him from *The Devil's Disciple* to a Broadway run in *Equus*, as Nugget, Alan Strang's favorite horse. He earned a Lucille Lortel Award nomination for his 2007 performance in *Election Day*.

His colleague Schmidt says that as Pisoni gained confidence, he gradually relaxed on stage: "He just acts easy now."

"Circus performing and acting require different sets of muscles," Irwin adds. "He hit a stride and is now sure-footed as an actor."

### LORENZO PISONI ISN'T RUNNING

away anymore—from the circus or anything else. His *Humor Abuse* is radically different than the original; he stares directly into his past, embracing the circus of his soul, exploring both his roots as a performer and his relationship with his father. The show begins with an apology to the audience for his not being funny, but there are indeed laughs to be had. "The funny stuff comes out of the fact that I'm a serious person and I'm talking about people with red noses rearing me," he says.

In college, the stories had merely been "mortar for the bricks," the circus bits. This time the storytelling became the foundation, especially after he turned again to Schmidt, who pitched in as both co-creator and director. Her first act was to cut the play to pieces. The history of clowning was gone; an imposed chronology supplied thematic structure. "I made it more a poignant love song to his father and a coming-of-age story," Schmidt says.

That pushed Pisoni past where he expected to go. "This is really not my comfort zone," he muses. "To set out my story for complete strangers and say, 'Here you go,' is a little daunting."

Schmidt excavated from Pisoni's recollections such incidents as the occasion when a circus technician screwed up for the umpteenth time, and his father Larry erupted, lambasting the man in public. Colleagues, dismayed by his outburst, upbraided Larry for his behavior—a big shock for 10-year-old Lorenzo, who witnessed his father's heroic infallibility evaporating in a very public way. Schmidt's editing creates a concise version of the story that nails the truth of that devastating moment for a young boy.

"Erica is very astute at storytelling," Pisoni says of his willingness to let her shape his life's tale. Schmidt returns the compliment by praising Pisoni for being ego-free in their collaboration. Indeed, he is open to suggestions from numerous voices. When the show's lighting designer Ben Stanton asked, "If you take away the circus tricks, do you have a play?" Schmidt and Pisoni decided to do just that, stripping out the juggling, the pratfalls, the bit inside a trunk, leaving just the stories. "It became very obvious where the holes were," Pisoni says. Only after the storytelling was fleshed out were the circus bits returned.

Pisoni interviewed family members and

former members of the Pickle Family to confirm certain memories. Irwin loaned props and gave gag advice; Larry Pisoni did too, but Lorenzo never shared the script with his father. Larry says he encouraged his son to "explore the dark side" and respects his decision to do so, though he adds, "I might stand up opening night and say, 'No, that's not what happened!' But Lorenzo is going to have his girlfriend sit next to me with a taser."

After the writing, Pisoni faced a second challenge, the ultimate hat trick—replacing his writer's hat with his actor's hat, learning to be in the moment, not editing the words while performing. Additionally, while performing, Pisoni faced another obstacle—he must be only an actor, not a son. "If I get emotional, it can ruin the storytelling," he says, pointing to the tale behind his name. His grandparents named their son Lawrence, not Lorenzo, to sound more American; Larry never liked his name and dubbed his clown alter ego Lorenzo Pickle. Then he passed on the identity he loved to his son. "The idea that he gave me his favorite name and all that encapsulates—it gets to me," Pisoni says, "but I've got to shut it off."

Pisoni's relationship with his father, who now lives in Seattle, is stronger than ever—they especially bonded when he was in *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Great Gatsby* at Seattle Repertory Theatre. Even with a flourishing acting career, Pisoni knows he never wants to get too far from what his father taught him. He regularly works physical bits into his dramatic roles, has worked as a physical-comedy consultant for actors such as David Arquette and Matthew Broderick, and helped Irwin choreograph the routines in Irwin's *Harlequin Studies*. The circus, he admits, will always "pull me back in."

Falling off a ladder, as he does in *Humor Abuse*, "feels like coming home," Pisoni acknowledges. One of his favorite gags is the bit in which he narrowly escapes a series of sandbags hurtling from the sky. It was one of his father's classic routines—Pisoni even worked the levers backstage for his father as a boy. "What's most fun for me is doing the stuff my father taught me," he says. "A new, different set of people should get to see it." 🎪

Stuart Miller lives in Brooklyn.

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