

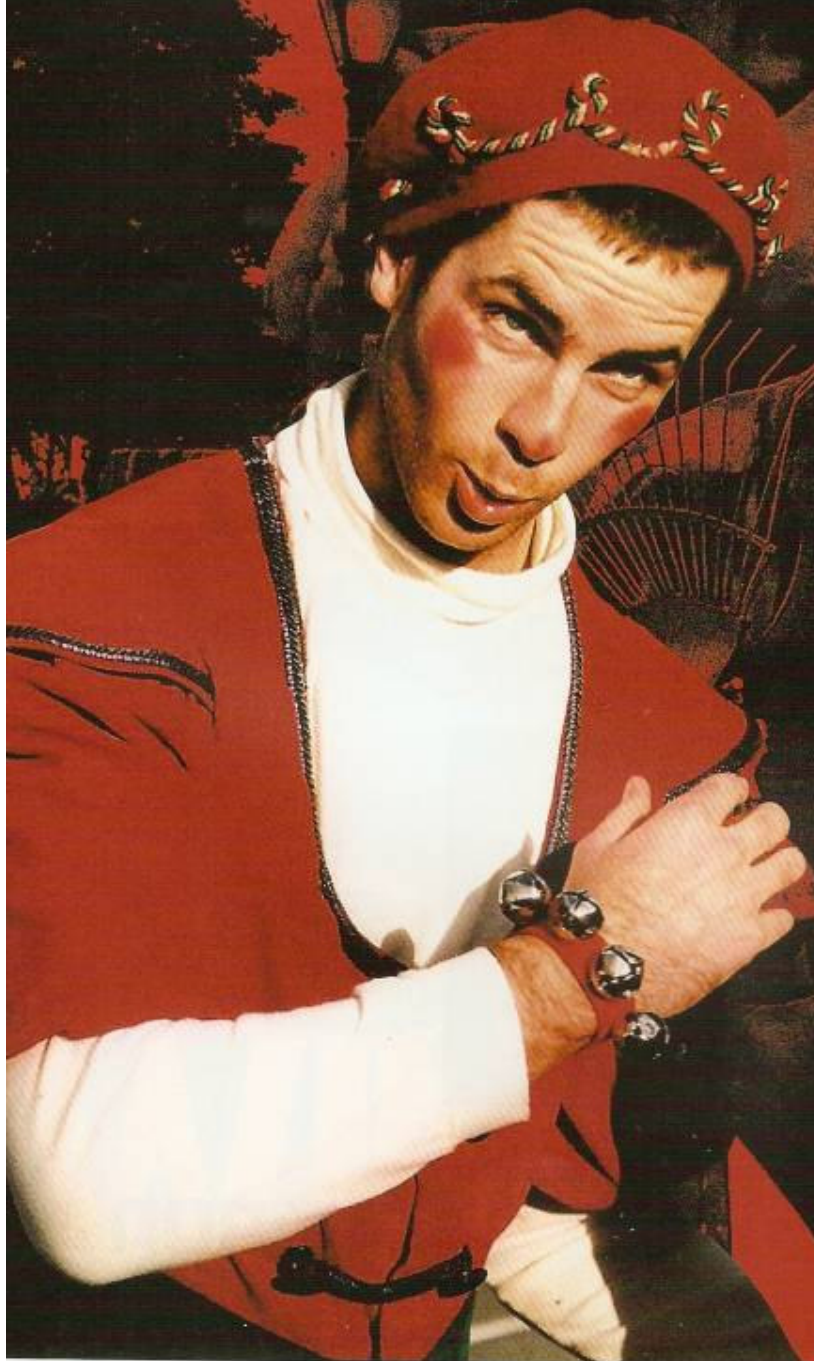
big in japan



text: penny jones

images: eamonn miller

A year working as a cowboy in a Japanese theme park has left Eamonn Miller with some killer stories, as Penny Jones discovers.



EAMONN MILLER GREW UP IN TASMANIA and was leading a quiet life in Melbourne, "mostly playing chess and eating donuts", when he read an ad in the paper: 'WANTED: improvisation comedians for job in Japan – great money, good fun, free accommodation and train travel.' The potential employer was Universal Studios in Osaka. Think all-American glitz and glamour – Marilyn, Elvis, Central Park and *Jurassic Park* – woven together with a unique Japanese spin.

Eamonn beat 500 hopefuls to the second round of auditions but then heard nothing for months. "I'd forgotten about the whole thing", he said, "when, out of the blue, I get a phone call from Japan saying 'do you want the job?'" It was one



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o'clock in the morning so I asked if I could think about it, but they said 'no, we need an answer right now.' So I said yes!"

On the night of his arrival there was a shindig to welcome the new recruits. "It was bizarre", he said, "I'd signed a year-long contract but they still hadn't told me what my job would be." He asked at the party and was told, "It's not so much improv comedy — it's more that you're gonna be a stuntman cowboy falling off a roof, kickin' a bad dude's ass and saving a damsel in distress." Within a week he was Lanky Doodle the cowboy, performing twice daily in *High Noon West*, a twenty-minute street show (in English and Japanese) set in the 1850s American Wild West.

And that wasn't all. After a training course in samurai swordsmanship and weeks of strenuous choreography he became the Medjai warrior from the film *The Mummy*. For two hours every afternoon he donned long black robes, painted on a moustache and beard and performed in a street parade that travelled the length of the park. "I had to run off a ye olde London bus, save another damsel and slice up Japanese guys in amazing rubber costumes", he said. "It was especially brutal in the heat and humidity of a Japanese summer and I was drenched in sweat by the end, but it's definitely one of my favourite memories."

High Noon West occasionally made way for themed events. At Halloween Eamonn was a ghostly gardener in a graveyard in pseudo Central Park, "creeping up and scaring the bejesus out of

visitors". Over Christmas, despite being six feet tall, he was transformed into a Christmas elf in white satin stockings, pixie boots and red pantaloons. "But by far the easiest job I had was playing a brash American tourist. I had free rein to do wacky little street scenes like sleeping on park benches, climbing trees or running into shops and yelling. And for this", Eamonn recalls with a grin, "I got paid mega bucks".

With a hefty monthly salary in American dollars going straight into his Australian bank account, a daily living allowance of US\$50, free accommodation, free travel and no bills, his three hours work a day were quite well remunerated. "I lived a life of absolute luxury", he said. "I could travel anywhere I wanted. There were even periods when I felt bad that they were paying us all this money for nothing but hey, I wasn't really going to complain about it!"

Approximately 150 other gaijin (foreign) performers were housed with Eamonn in an apartment complex close to the park. "They were mostly Americans, but there were six or seven Aussies and Kiwis", he said. "I lived next door to this big, beefy, bronzed guy called Hollywood [his real name was Brian] who was one of the jet ski stuntmen from the *Waterworld* show. Doc Brown from *Back to the Future* was a good friend and John Connor from *Terminator 2* lived just down the hall."

Eamonn and his fellow foreigners were treated

well — "like gods!" he exclaims. "It was the Japanese performers who did all the hard work." While the gaijin performers spent their downtime watching movies and eating, the Japanese performers spent all day rehearsing and performing. "They played all the characters whose heads were not shown and compared to them, we were pampered movie stars."

To go with this newfound star status, Eamonn boasted "a few hardcore fans". "We all had them. They were either schoolkids or married middle-aged Japanese women who came to the park every single day. They often dressed their kids like us so I'd have 'mini-me' ghostly gardeners, elves, cowboys or Medjai warriors following me around! They would take hundreds of photos and give them to us in cutesy decorated albums as presents after every show. It wouldn't be odd to see them back at the apartment complex. I even came out of the shower one day to find one of them sitting on my bed!"

The whole experience was "unreal", according to Eamonn. "Japan is like nowhere else I'd ever been and nothing else I'd ever experienced, just leaving the apartment to go to the shops was an adventure. I love Japanese people too. They are such friendly, joyful people, so genuine, outgoing and fun to be around. After a year of theme-park life, I was definitely ready to go back to a more Western kind of normality", recalls Eamonn, "But I'll never forget how much I loved living there or a few of my more vivid memories, like watching a burning red sunrise from the top of Mt Fuji or wondering if I was about to die as an earthquake hit while I was naked on the loo." It seems that even Lanky Doodle can be shaken up by the prospect of this dreaded Japanese natural disaster. ☒

