

FRIDAY AUGUST 8, 2014

Ian Smith

Artist and performer

Born: January 2, 1959;
Died: August 1, 2014.

IAN SMITH, who has died aged 55 after a long struggle with severe depression, was an artist, performer, art gangster and mischief maker. He leaves a massive legacy of work and memories for the hundreds who have worked with him and his company, Glasgow-based Mischief La Bas.

If you have had your shoes washed by the Elvis Cleaning Company or seen a group of terrified Christmas trees being chased by a mad cartoon axe man, you will have seen his work. Or perhaps you attended a Festival Of Fudge or the Market Of Optimism or were lucky enough to be accosted in some far-flung Scottish village by a tribe of Vikings desperate to make amends for that burning and pillaging all those centuries ago.

Or maybe just last week you were astonished to see the Fan Families, six teetering towers of puppets moving amongst the crowds at the Commonwealth Games.

Ian Smith moved between making art and making entertainment with ease, confidence and charm. He was constantly creating and finding new ways of sharing his view of the world through every available medium: art to performance, radio and television to cabaret and circus.

He delighted in what he called weird and wonderful arty stuff and supporting those who experimented and challenged themselves with their art. But the hundred of messages that have flooded the internet following the news of his death talk not only of the extraordinary nature of his vision but also his generous, gentle soul.

He was born in London and decided at the age of 14, after a childhood of dressing up, that he was going to make his stamp on the world through performing. He was also a huge fan of David Bowie and had wardrobes full of T-shirts and Bowie paraphernalia.

He was a family man and he and wife Angie have given Stanley and Lily the most grounded, if surreal, family upbringing. He would kiss them goodbye and go to work – always immaculately dressed, whether in suit or perfectly accessorised Hawaiian shirt, sometimes with a prop, such as

a full-size triffid under his arm. Then he would come home and be a “pipe and slippers” dad.

Sometimes the children would be taken to work too – once to their delight being incarcerated in a cage as willing actors in his show *Painful Creatures*.

As one family friend said: “I have rarely met a dad who took such delight in his family. I loved the way he spoke about Stan and Lily as though he couldn’t quite believe he and Angie had created such fabulous creatures. He took enormous pleasure in recounting their stories and was so very proud of everything they achieved.”

In some ways, this family spirit was extended towards the entire madcap population of Dennistoun, most notoriously in the annual Smith family Guy Fawkes Party, which was famous for its anarchic and ritualistic display of dodgy pyrotechnics.

He and I met when, as a first year student, he came to help Roger Ely and myself run our Brighton Contemporary Art Festival in the late 1970s. We became close friends and over 35 years performed and collaborated together on hundreds of projects.

He and I toured the UK and Holland with solo shows, his *Band Birds With Ears*, and the legendary *Wild Wigglers* that he had created with Liz Aggiss and Billie Cowie.

In 1982, when we set up the Zap Club, it was inevitable he became master of ceremonies, a role he reprised as the hugely charismatic ringmaster of *Archaos Circus* and later as MC for the *National Review Of Live Art*, where many young artists benefited from his boundless support.

But it was back at the Zap that he developed his extraordinary sense of timing and generosity to the artists and the long-suffering audience. He created the *Tuesday Night Platform*, a totally anarchic open mike event where he brought on performers of wildly varying talent with heart-warming enthusiasm. Whatever then transpired, Ian got them off stage with dignity.

We travelled together to Glasgow in 1988 to work on the *Streetbiz Festival* and then he and Angie ran away to join the circus and spent three years travelling the world before coming back to settle in Glasgow and form *Mischief La Bas*.

Some time later he wrote on the *Birds*



With *Ears* page of www.punkbrighton.com: “We’re all history baby! Warmest regards to all the survivors. Anyone wanting to check out our current nonsense can explore www.mischiefabas.co.uk, which apart from anything else might encourage “youngsters” to have faith in the fact you don’t have to get a proper job or fall for the audition pop idol crap system – just form a band, dance company, circus whatever and get on with it. Make *Mischief*”.

Mischief started in the *Arches* where he and Angie and artist Rachel Mimiec would make durational performance around the club, sewing each other into picture frames and endlessly peeling potatoes.

One of the highlights of their early collaborative relationship with *The Arches*’ director Andy Arnold was the devising of *Metropolis*, a live multimedia project with 80 performers that used the whole building, another device he would use in subsequent projects. Over the years the company grew and with it a reputation in the UK and Europe.

He created a signature style of multiple characters and walkabout theatre that, while being entertaining and accessible, always carried an observational edge.

Building on the experience of *Metropolis* he created a series of commissioned large-scale indoor and outdoor shows, notably the crashing of

a full-size space ship into Glasgow for the millennium. His solo shows were a revelation.

From the eccentric *Hokey Cokey* man filmed on a Sri Lankan beach, the beautifully delivered and poignant songs of *Hurty Gurty Man*, to the critically acclaimed intimate shows at *Dance Base*, his work was art of the highest order – performance becoming poetry.

He has brought us great joy and in the words of his *Funny GI* “and may his fame ever spread”.

He is survived by wife Angie, children Stanley and Lily, parents Don and Heather and brother Alan.

NEIL BUTLER