

MAY 17TH 2002

I just came back yesterday from 10 days in New York, near Gramercy Park. I taught 32 years, inner-city Milwaukee and left ten years ago to run our soap business. I love people, play guitar for children all over America, and was in town for a two night, "Off-Off Broadway" presentation of my life with Dr. Bronners Soaps, music and people.

New York people are now my big story! I did not go to one tourist attraction but instead experienced your wonderful people in Street fairs and markets, walking neighborhoods and visiting New Yorker's we've helped as well as getting ready for the show.

The highlight of this all were my experiences at PS 76 on 121st and the people I met in Harlem. Because of donating some soap and money to a teacher there, I promised to play guitar for the students. The stereotype image of Harlem that reaches out to us in the Midwest is that I was risking life and limb, should wear a bulletproof jacket and only go in daylight. I was apprehensive.

The reality was that I met such wonderful lovely children and teachers that I went back a week later. What a joy to get the kids laughing and singing, to be hugged by teachers, administrator and kids, to be known as "the soap man!" The teacher, Tom Goodridge who is white also, walked me two blocks to treat me to a meal and I would say at least ten neighbors shook his hand or hugged him. Because the feeling I got when I called back home in Milwaukee was that I was just lucky, I did something real crazy: I rode the bus on Saturday night around 7 from Union Square to 168th street. Both ways from 91st and back I was the only white man. I did not hear or see one siren, fight, mugging, homeless person etc. from the window of the bus. I did see people helping a mother overloaded with bags and kids, to her seat, many thank yous to the bus driver, kids laughing on playgrounds, lots of balloons and wonderful people.

Of course I know that crimes, poverty etc. were going on somewhere, as it does in all cities, but unless the Mayor told the people, "Shape up! we have a visitor coming!" I saw the REAL Harlem and the only crime is that the media has not given it the same coverage as it gave the murders, riots, gangs and rapes that used to be the main news.

I will be "adopting" PS 76, a school stripped of its music program, without a piano or guitar. It now will get a guitar and the experience will always be in my heart. One of the many thank you's from the kids that I will treasure is from a girl who wrote me in neat print: "Dear Dr. Bronner, I am six years old and I love you and I may take you out....." In spirit I'll take her up on it.

Love in All-one!  
Ralph Bronner

# Time Out

## New York

### THEATER

#### OFF-OFF BROADWAY

*Times Sq (see Broadway subway info). \$15. Schedule varies; call ahead. Through May 18.* Marivaux's humanist satire about love and gender is adapted and staged by Moritz von Stuelpnagel.

**Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap Show: Stories, Songs and Suds**

Present Company Theatorium, 198 Stanton St between Attorney and Ridge Sts (212-420-8877). Subway: F, V to lower East Side-Second Ave. \$5. Note: Each audience member receives a complimentary bar or bottle of Dr. Bronner's soap. Sun, Mon 8pm. Through Mon 13. Soap maker Ralph Bronner, son of Dr. Bronner, tells stories about his eccentric father (remember the kooky exhortations on the label of your liquid peppermint soap?), sings songs and gives out free soap. See "Mr. Clean," page 164.

## Sunday 12

### Urban affairs

#### Mother's Day

Call your mom. And be nice.

**Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap Show: Stories, Songs and Suds**

Present Company Theatorium, 198 Stanton St between Attorney and Ridge Sts (212-420-8877). Subway: F, V to Lower East Side-Second Ave. Sun, Mon 8pm; suggested donation \$5. Each audience member receives a complimentary bar or bottle of Dr. Bronner's soap. Dr. Bronner's son Ralph carries on his father's soapmaking legacy, and in this performance, he discusses the company, sings a rendition of the Wisconsin state song and recounts the tale of how he broke into Muhammad Ali's house with a case of soap. Proceeds from the event go to Nkeanye Support Service, an organization that helps Nigerian women. See also "Mr. Clean," page 164.

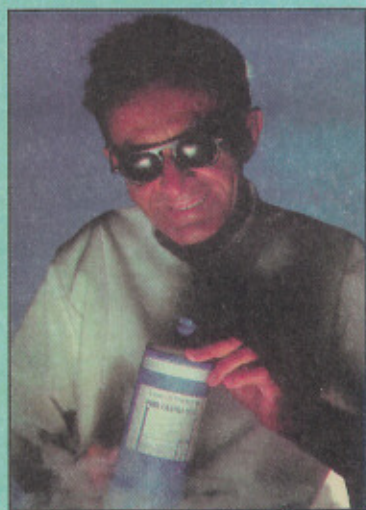
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## Mr. Clean

Ralph Bronner preaches the Moral ABC's in his *Magic Soap Show* By Trav S.D.

Cleanliness is next to godliness, goes the homily. In the case of Dr. Bronner's 18-in-1 pure castile soaps, this is literally true. Each bottle of the highly concentrated multiuse liquid-obliguous in health-food stores, campgrounds and models' dressing rooms-is covered by words of wisdom from sages through the ages, reinterpreted in the highly idiosyncratic stylings of the good "doctor" himself. Take, for instance, this doozy from Dr. Bronner's peppermint label: "Teach friend and enemy the moral ABC that unites all mankind free in our Eternal Father's great All-One-God-Faith...EXCEPTIONS? NONE!" Literally mixed in with these



pronouncements are tips on the best uses for the product inside: "Keep Out of Eyes! Wash Out with Water! Dilute! Dilute! OK!"

What's this gibberish all about? We're about to find out. Ralph Bronner, son of the late soap maker-prophet and keeper of the Moral ABC (the St. Paul to his Jesus as it were), will be spilling his story in Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap Show: Stories, Songs and Suds. The solo show features tape recordings of his father, a chronological sketch of Dr. Bronner's life, humorous and poignant stories about adventures in the soap trade, folk songs and a performance by singer Dorothy Scott, a longtime FOB (Friend of Bronner's)

Friends such as Scott are key to the All-One-God-Faith. "We have no marketing budget," says Bronner, 65, over the phone in his thick Wisconsin accent. "I drive all around the country, making no appointments, and I give out free soap. The \$8 million-a-year business is driven entirely by word of mouth. I inherited the gift of gab from my father."

While the reigning Bronner may be eccentric, he can't hold a candle to his old man. Emmanuel Bronner (1908-1997), whose gravestone reads: A life dedicated to God, Mankind and Spaceship Earth. The elder Bronner, who came from a long line of soap makers, began preaching at a young age, shaking his fist for the Zionist cause. He immigrated to the U.S. from Germany in 1929 after a dispute with his father, who didn't like him proselytizing in the workplace. He fled just in time to avoid the Nazis, but didn't find the U.S. terribly hospitable. He was committed to mental institutions three times before he

NO SCRUBS The late, eccentric Dr. Bronner believed in healthy living and thinking

finally escaped and ran away to California to found his soap company. As a teenager, Ralph was made to sit up late into the night typing as his father (who'd gone blind) dictated the soap labels. Perhaps it was inevitable that all this would wind up onstage. The initial impulse came from Sara Lamm of Teatro de los Interesados (producers of *The Dog and Pony Show*), who had adapted some of the label text for a theater piece she did last year. When Ralph found out, he sent her several cases of free soap. He remained in constant touch in the months that followed (she is now an FOB). Resulting first in a Lamm-produced segment on Bronner for National Public Radio, and now the Dr. Bronner solo show.

"I'm constantly in front of an audience anyway," says Bronner. "I help run a coffeehouse in Milwaukee where I sing folk songs. I perform in public schools, and I speak at colleges." Besides, the late doctor himself must have been a theater aficionado if the peppermint label is any indication: "Shakespeare's Hamlet, 1606: 'Act well your part, complete the great full-truth task...uniting the whole human race in our Eternal Father's great All-One-God-Faith!'" While one strives in vain to find those exact words in the tragedy which most scholars think was written in 1600—the truth of them is hard to deny.

Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap Show: Stories, Songs and Suds plays Sunday 12 and Monday 13 at the Present Company Theatorium.