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Max's positive message for kids

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On Aug. 17, a Canadian legend will be entertaining the children of Campbell River.

"I haven't been to Campbell River in almost 20 years," says children's entertainer Robert Stelmach, who goes by the stage name Max Tell, and has a career spanning over a 23-year period. "How it all happened was I was working on some material, and I turned it into a Christmas card and gave it to friends. One of them happened to be a teacher who asked me to come to his school and present it."

That is how Stelmach's fabled career began. A career which has seen just about everything, from performances in Vietnamese boat camps, to libraries in rural communities with deaf audiences.

"I had some audiences where the teachers would sign to them," explains Stelmach, who has a genuine appreciation for being able to reach out to kids. "On the boat camps, there were some adults who had been forced to live there since the war. Even though I couldn't speak their language, I was able to grab their attention with some of my more physical pieces."

It was during his tour of Asia in 1994, where Stelmach says he was treated like royalty. During his '94 tour, Stelmach performed in schools and events all over Asia, in places such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Manila and Bangkok.

He seems to enjoy putting himself in situations where it might not seem easy to gain instant respect from an audience, but things coming easy is not in Stelmach's vocabulary.

When he was younger, he suffered from what he calls "Short term memory loss," something he says still troubles him. It was difficult for him to remember even the simplest of verses, and because of this he suffered, especially as a young man in school.

"When I was younger I had a hard time learning," Stelmach reminisces. "The finger was pointed at me, and I was never supposed to amount to anything. I couldn't even make sense of an essay until after university."

After Stelmach graduated with a bachelors in fine arts, he pursued an acting career at a children's theatre in Toronto, where his inability to memorize became a severe hindrance.

"It was kind of weird, because everyone memorized their part, but whenever I was called on, I couldn't get the right words out," said Stelmach.

Stelmach's memory problems may cause him to occasionally be at odds with himself and others, but it also seems to be the driving force behind his stories, which provide young audiences with insight into deep rooted issues. One of his newer stories, Little Johnny Small, is about forgiveness.

"Little Johnny is really small," recited Stelmach over the phone. "Big Johnny was really mean, because sometimes when we are bigger, we just don't know how to handle it, especially when people treat us differently. Even though Big Johnny is a big mean guy, Little Johnny still forgives him, because it's important to stay positive and understand that even though somebody might seem really mean to you, it doesn't mean they don't have their own problems to deal with."

It becomes apparent after reading and listening to Stelmach's work, and speaking with him, that the overall message the children's entertainer tries to convey, is positivity and happiness.

"Well I have one story called Octopus Ink that's all about tears," warns Stelmach, who says the purpose of the story is to characterize fear. "In terms of children, you want to help them get over fear, even though fear may not always have a resolution."

And Octopus Ink apparently has no resolution, which is what makes it such an interesting piece to be presenting to children.

"There's enough resolution in my other stories," says Stelmach. "It's important to teach children reality as well as fantasy. Sometimes not everything can be resolved, but it doesn't mean you can't be happy and still have fun. That's what Octopus Ink is about. It came to me while I was listening to the voice of Boris Karlov, who was the original Frankenstein. Children love to be scared, and we always want to help them realize there is light at the end of tunnel."

Stelmach will perform at the Campbell River Public Library on Shoppers Row on Aug. 17 at 10:45am. For more information, call the library at 250-287-3655.