

EAST SIDE STORY

A Cheesy Way of Knowledge

By Julie Feinstein

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You kick the giant glass and metal doors open with one sneakered foot and heft your mighty bulk sideways to enter the climate-controlled building. Sweat's already rolling down your cheeks and into your eyes, but you can't reach your face; your arms are trapped. Into the elevator, out again, down the hall, your heart racing as you prepare yourself to become a spectacle. You can't see the reporter racing alongside you because the heavy structure you're encased in allows for no peripheral vision. After checking every doorplate on the floor, you turn completely around to face the reporter and admit, "We're in the wrong place. We'll have to go back to the van and check the directions."

You are "Cheesy," the brainchild of the California Milk Advisory Board and the Montgomery Group marketing firm. Your mission: to promote Real California Cheese. During the month of October, as part of "Octoberfeast," you transform yourself into a giant slice of pizza and roam the streets of California, making special appearances at festivals, board meetings, on radio talk-shows. And once a day you waltz into some local pizzeria and award an unsuspecting pizza consumer with \$1,000, presuming the pizza he or she has purchased is one topped with Real California Cheese, of course.

Actually, there are two Cheesys; Northern California Slice and Southern California Slice. This helps to make the giveaways appear more random and far-reaching. Curious about Cheesy life, I arranged a date to ride along, to see what a day in the life of a pizza slice was really like. I would accompany Brian Joseph, an Oakland actor, as he worked his wizardry at a midday appearance, and then witness the wonder of the giveaway process that evening.

On the way up to Sacramento, I hear pizzas being given away or at least discussed on two different radio stations, direct results of the now two-week-old campaign that has included prerecorded commercial spots and live interviews, which is part of where the acting comes in. Both cheesemen are over six feet tall, and both apparently have that special something that empowers them to handle the most public part of the Real California Cheese campaign. They have been trusted to represent the California Milk Advisory Board, a weighty responsibility, yet they must also

be just wacky enough to play this Slice character. One can almost feel the apprehension; “The fate of our cheese is in his hands.”

I arrive at the hotel at the time appointed by Cheesy’s handlers. Even out of costume, No-Cal Slice is easy to spot. The height I know to look for, but it is more his goofy posture, gray-striped pajama pants, red sweatshirt, and brown homburg hat that says, “This is a guy willing to spend a month alone in a van in a giant pizza suit.” He looks like a cross between Elliott Gould and Adam Sandler, but stretched.

He checks out of the hotel and we get into the Cheesemobile, a plain, shiny, white GMC van provided by CMAB. The van is filled with the usual road trip detritus: a mix of empty and full water bottles, Clif bar wrappers (okay, health-conscious road trip detritus), clothes, tapes, plus the huddling mound swathed in red cloth, lying in wait in the back.

The cell phone rings. Along with the van, hotel accommodations, plump hourly wage, and costume, CMAB has furnished Slice with a phone which must be turned on at all times so that he can be reached in case of a cheesy emergency. “Could be some official cheese business, ’scuse me...Slice here!” It’s the Montgomery group, checking in. Is the journalist okay? Does Slice have his itinerary? He’s decided he wants to switch hotels for tonight so that he can be closer to tomorrow’s 7 a.m. radio appearance. They’re taking care of it for him. This is not the usual life of an actor on tour; this gig is funded.

“I don’t think you have to be an actor to do this, this isn’t acting,” he says. But could anyone put on the suit and be Cheesy? Would anyone? To an actor, this is a good deal, \$25 an hour, more than most actors make doing live performance (plus he gets to keep the cell phone). And actors tend to be more flexible than most people, welcoming the opportunity to go on tour with a show for weeks or months at a time; this is part of the dream of theater. The difference is, at least, on tour, actors travel in a pack. Joseph has phone contact with home base, but otherwise he’s solo. He’s been on the road for two weeks, and now he suddenly has a companion for the day.

“I’ve had some ideas for things to do with Cheesy. I’ve been wanting to take some pictures, show Cheesy’s seamier side, you know, Cheesy shooting pool, Cheesy picking up girls, Cheesy at a urinal.” This guy has obviously been alone with the costume for too long. I agree that it would be fun, but even if we did do something like that, I couldn’t write about it.

I'm not interested in incurring the wrath of the CMAB. Cheesy has to be wholesome, man! The corporate sponsors would not be amused.

He enlists my services as copilot and we set out for phase one of the day, locating the site of his lunchtime appearance. It's an industrial park; low, black, mirrored buildings and lots of parking. The fax says he's going to appear during the lunch break for an all-day meeting of a packaged foods company that uses RCC. The fax says he's supposed to give a presentation about his experiences so far on the campaign. It seems like an awfully straight assignment for a Slice. Perhaps they should have provided a special triangle-shaped business suit to go over the costume for the occasion.

Once the location is scoped, we go in search of breakfast, careening through the near-barren streets of suburban-industrial Sacramento, Joseph simultaneously stacking up tapes he'd like to play for me as he drives. He pops in a loud world-music mix. "I like to have a soundtrack to my life, you know?" He's craving bagels, but there don't seem to be any bagel places in this part of Sacramento, so we end up at Denny's. While we're ordering he informs me that he's a vegetarian and his girlfriend is vegan. So I feel safe telling him my dirty little secret, that I don't eat dairy products. In fact, originally I was supposed to accompany him to the Modesto Wine and Cheese Festival on October 11, Yom Kippur. And I almost did it, but I also don't drink, and the idea of a dairy-intolerant, sober Jew following a human pizza slice around a festival of consumption while fasting in honor of the holiest day of the year seemed a bit much; I'd decided against it. (His girlfriend wasn't so happy about him working on Yom Kippur either, but such are the demands of art.)

The mention of our ethnic identities launches him into a discussion of internalized anti-Semitism, white guilt, and interracial dating. It turns out that, when not acting, Joseph facilitates workshops on race identity and awareness, as well as various other socially sensitive topics, for children and adults. He has also taught Shakespeare to at-risk youth in Los Angeles. Since moving to the Bay Area seven months ago, he has joined Angry White Guys for Affirmative Action.

The oldest people in California seem to be congregating at this Denny's under really sad-looking Halloween decorations. The waitress brings an omelet and a vague approximation of a bagel with a tiny foil packet of cream cheese. "Is this Real California Cheese?" Joseph asks in his special Cheesy voice, a kind of rapid, high-pitched, New York lisp (as if he

borrowed it from a guy named Lefty). “Yeah, right honey,” the waitress mutters, turning away.

While eating, he tells me more about himself; he’s not just an actor and an activist, but a songwriter as well. “One good thing about this job is that it gives me a lot of time to write. I just wrote a new song the other morning in my hotel room.” Between appearances Joseph seeks out open-mike venues in various towns (performing his songs sans pizza suit).

The waitress comes back to our table and he starts in on her again. “I’m sorry but I couldn’t eat this cream cheese because I couldn’t tell if it was Real California Cheese or not.”

“Honey, I’ll give you a quarter and you can call someone who cares.” She laughs at her own joke, but by now the people behind us have joined in the speculation. Then the cashier calls out to us that it’s from Illinois.

Joseph goes out to the van and gets “It’s the Cheese” buttons for everyone in the restaurant. Everyone is smiling. He’s the Good Will Ambassador of Cheese.

So now we’re speeding to Cheesy’s first appearance of the day and singing along to Sammy Davis Jr.’s rendition of the theme from Shaft (it’s on his “get psyched” mix tape). I’m just glad he found it, since searching through that big nylon bag-o-tapes was making for swervy driving. I catch myself describing the concept of celebrity cover tunes as “cheesy” and immediately apologize, as if Joseph’s feelings might get hurt.

We park the van and the preparations begin. First he has to change into his special red tights, yellow satin-sleeved shirt, shiny yellow gloves, and massive yellow Converse hi-tops (size 13) with RCC logos. Then he goes around to the back of the van, pulls up the rear window, ducks inside—bending over at the waist, slides the cover off the costume, dives into the tip, and in one fluid motion slides the slice backward out of the van and forward up over his head. He’s exposed from the knees down and his arms and face look like errant pizza toppings. One heart-level pepperoni slice has been replaced by the RCC symbol. He’s probably five feet wide at the crust, eight feet tall, and about two feet thick, covered in foam, satin, and felt, pepperonis, green peppers, olives, and mushrooms. One more RCC logo adorns his back/crust, just in case he’s approached from behind.

It’s a wonder of nature watching Joseph maneuver this enormous mass through doorways, into elevators. Once the costume’s on, he’s all

business, his walk as brisk as his accent. I get that feeling again that Cheesy is really a New Yorker (blasphemy). I have to run to keep up. As we pass by, people have one of two reactions: either they openly stare, usually with a half-smile and some kind of comment: “You look delicious!” says one woman. “So do you, honey!” Cheesy replies and then immediately reprimands himself for besmirching his wholesome image; or they pretend not to notice, averting their eyes as if he were some kind of unfortunate atrocity (“That poor boy, it’s not his fault he was born in the shape of a slice of pizza”).

There is some confusion at first, the fax having directed us to the wrong building, but finally we get to the right room. We burst through the door and Cheesy is on, shaking hands, posing for pictures, shmoozing folks in business suits at every table. They don’t exactly seem to be expecting him, nor do they know what to do with him. They keep offering us soda and cookies. But he is on and he is working, making conversation with everyone about the importance of Real California Cheese. In spite of the air conditioning, he is soaked with sweat. Just when it seems like we are in danger of becoming ignored, we say our goodbyes.

On the way out of the building, Cheesy is spotted by an office full of desked women who shout out to him. Ever the people’s hero (or unable to resist the attention), Cheesy veers into their domain, letting them touch his toppings. He gathers them all together for a group photo, quite the ladies’ man.

It’s too early in the day to do the giveaway yet, but we go to the selected restaurant, a Round Table Pizza in a strip mall, to make sure they have the “POS” materials—“point of sale”—those cardboard cut-outs you always see on tables and in windows and hanging from the ceilings of restaurants that proudly proclaim the brand of beer served, type of soda available, featured dessert on special, or in this case, the birthplace of their cheese.

He checks in on the cell phone with mission control, cracking jokes with his supervisor about Cheesy’s darker side. She wants to know if the writer is doing okay. (I am perilously close to the inner sanctum, and Cheesy has a rep to protect.)

“They can’t handle me,” he says, referring to his sense of humor. “I don’t think I’m that over-the-top. People don’t talk to people. That’s why they think I’m weird. I talk to people.”

We have some time to kill, so we go shopping in the mall next to the mall with the lucky pizzeria in it. We stop at a bookstore where he buys *Performing Songwriter* magazine and a book of poems for his girlfriend. We stop at a cafe for lunch. He asks the cashier if the pesto sandwich has cheese on it. It must! He asks three other women working there if the pesto sandwich has cheese on it. They all shrug and smile nervously. "Everyone likes cheese!" he announces, grinning. It's a little eerie to hear the voice naked like that, without the suit.

The dinner rush is still a ways off and he has to wait until the restaurant is crowded in order to do the giveaway, in order to make the most of the suit and the drama. We sit in the cafe and chat. He tells me about his hobbies (rock climbing, skydiving, paragliding), his music, the speech teacher who encouraged him to go into acting. He's a self-proclaimed obsessive. "I once wrote a 200-page manuscript on tour...I used to rock-climb four days a week...Music is where my real passion is, even though I don't like to admit it. It just happens naturally...The acting's been primary, but I can't lose myself in it; acting is my career, but it becomes mundane —parts of it that I don't like that I have to do, like the business side—and I do feel really lucky to be supporting myself as an actor.

"I've been really lucky. One job led to another. I haven't really had to work at it...If I started sending out my demo tapes I will have tried harder to be a musician than I've tried to be an actor."

His private beeper goes off. It's a message about an audition (non-Slice related). He's going to have to find a way to fit it into his Cheesy schedule.

Finally, the time comes, and we move the van to a spot near but just behind the restaurant, so people won't see him changing. Once again he dons the (by now somewhat sweaty) tights and satin-sleeved shirt and shoes and gloves while elucidating for me the finer points of early Bruce Springsteen.

Taking the role of flunky, I hold the clipboard of forms (photo releases, legal mumbo jumbo about the money, \$50 traveler's checks for the employees —also part of the giveaway), the bag of pins and pens, the very large blank check for \$1,000, mounted on foam core for effect (just like Publishers' Clearinghouse), and the camera. Joseph swooshes up and into the pizza suit, taking the check and the bag and the clipboard. Cheesy is on again, moving quickly. In the past, people aware of the campaign have spotted him and run ahead into the pizza place, hoping to

win; that doesn't happen here. It's extremely hot, but one gets the sense that even on a good day this part of Sacramento probably still moves very slowly. We enter the restaurant, Cheesy turning sideways to get through the door. The employees stare in wide-eyed shock, half-giggling. One little girl hides behind her father. Cheesy asks to see the manager and then starts joking around with the patrons. "Yep, I'm gonna win all the costume contests this Halloween."

He explains the procedure to the manager, that the next patron to order a pizza wins \$1,000. The manager points to a gray-haired, fit-looking man in a polo shirt and shorts. Cheesy sidles up, asks the guy his name, and surreptitiously writes "Phil" on the big check in big black letters, all the while making idle conversation about the possibility of winning: "What would you say if I told you that you've just won \$1,000?" Phil chuckles, "I wouldn't believe you." Cheesy hands over the check. Phil still won't believe it. He looks at me. "This is a joke, right?" He looks at the pizza jockeys, repeating, "This is a joke, right?" and shaking his head, even while he's posing for pictures with Cheesy and the check. A free thousand dollars apparently takes a while to sink in. One of the patrons complains to Cheesy that she's been waiting for her pizza for half an hour and she should have won. Her husband and two small children look at him sullenly, accusingly. Why couldn't they win?

"Hey, do I win anything?" one waitress demands. She will, but she doesn't know that yet.

"Can I eat you?" a small child calls out, from a safe distance.

"What're you gonna do with all that money, Phil?" Cheesy asks, as the winner is filling out the necessary paperwork, holding his nearly forgotten pizza vertically against his side.

"I guess I'm gonna take a ski trip!" Phil smiles, still looking a little perplexed. One of the owners gently reminds him to hold his pizza flat. Clearly hunger has slipped to the back of his mind. Cheesy takes off with the clipboard to get the names and signatures of all the employees working that night. They'll each receive a \$50 traveler's check, just for being there. Phil turns to me and says, quietly, "I know where this is going," waiving the check, "straight to my kid's tuition."

Back at the van, Joseph exits the suit once again, but before it's finally laid to rest I let myself get talked into trying it on. It feels good actually,

not too heavy, though I can see how it would get to be if I had to wear it longer, and I strike a few Cheesy poses of my own.

He drives us back to the hotel parking lot, where I've left my car, and we play a few songs for each other on his guitar before saying goodbye.

He invites me to come again; it gets so lonely interacting with the world from the inside of a pizza suit. No one knows who you really are. I refuse. Only one of us will be paid big bucks for this day, and it won't be me. I am going home; his job will take him to Santa Rosa for a radio interview tomorrow, at 7 a.m., in character.