



SANTA KLUTZ

Swindle all the way

The job of a shopping-mall Santa is to make a child believe in magic. **Oliver Roberts** dons the suit and finds that kids are smarter than you think

MY first attempt at being Santa was an immediate failure. Not only did I put the red-and-white jacket on backwards so that the three black buttons were running down my back, but just as I left the changing room I passed a little girl who, in reply to my jolly waving and ho-ho-hoing, pointed at me and shouted: "That's not a real beard!"

When all her fellow *enfants terrible* heard this, they laughed and mocked in unison. In an irony only an abysmal Santa like me could understand, I became ridiculously thankful for the beard that was arousing the ridicule, because it disguised the red shades of embarrassment bursting from my cheeks. "You're not getting any presents this year, you little bastards!" I said.

No, I didn't really say that. Instead, I did what any good Santa would do: run away as fast as possible and hide among the plastic reindeer.

This is the type of nameless horror that hundreds of men all over the world face each December when they don the famous red-and-white suit and go out into shopping malls to do battle for children's innocence. It's an uncompromising pursuit: very, very thin is the line between making a child's eyes sparkle with enchantment or irrevocably ruining their Christmas fantasy.

"To do this job, you have to understand kids, understand that they live in a magic world," says 54-year-old Bundu Conradie, who became a Santa after being spotted by a Santa scout from Round Table. He's been Sandton City's Santa in residence for six years. Eleven months of the year he's a farmer in the Karoo.

Conradie arrives at the mall at 9am and works until 6pm or 8pm, depending on the shopping hours. He reckons he sees up to 1 000 children a day. It's mid-morning when I begin my shift as Santa and, after the costume and beard debacle, I am relieved to be working alongside the seasoned Conradie. I am too slim to be a



SPOT THE FAKE: Oliver Roberts (left) gets some sorely needed advice from seasoned Santa Bundu Conradie

believable Santa and, in my baggy outfit and scuffed sneakers, I look like an emaciated heroin addict elfing around to fund my next fix.

"Hello . . . and what's your name?" Conradie asks a five-year-old girl. The dialogue is pretty standard after that: "Have you been good this year?" and "What do you want for Christmas?" The answer to the former is always yes (usually the mother says no), but the second is more specific.

Though I manage to entice some of the less discerning children to respond positively to me, Conradie's mince-pie belly and bona fide beard constantly

poke a stick in my spokes. Kids are not as stupid as you might think, so the key to being a successful Santa is authenticity. Without it you will, as I did, make little boys sob with disillusionment. I was so awful that one parent asked me to get out of the sleigh where her two children sat on Conradie's knee, because I was about to ruin the photograph.

The following morning, I visit Fourways Mall. Sitting patiently on his throne is 50-year-old David Lottering. It is only his fifth day on the job. "Midway through day one, I was wondering what I'd let

myself in for," admits Lottering, momentarily making me feel better about my emasculating performance. "But now I'm having fun; every day is an adventure. So many things happen."

Days earlier, he had two women sit on his lap and take off their tops for the photo. "They had bras on, but, still, I didn't know where to look," Lottering says.

Within 10 minutes, Lottering has seen about seven children. One gives him a detailed drawing of all the things he wants for Christmas; others, Lottering reveals, are more technically

minded: "Some ask if they can send me their wish list via e-mail." Like Conradie, Lottering is an infallible Santa impostor. He's been growing his beard since June and works hard to maintain his affable belly. Lots of mince pies? "Beer, actually . . ." he whispers.

Ralph Groome, 70, has been Cresta Shopping Centre's Santa for 10 years.

"Initially I did it to make a couple of extra bob, but I loved it so much that I didn't want to stop," says Groome. He is so established and popular that parents will not take their children to any other Santa, and he has got to know his regular visitors by name.

Groome begins growing his magnificent beard in April and ritualistically shaves it off on Christmas day. "Occasionally you get a child who doesn't believe in Santa," says Groome. "When this happens, I ask them to feel my beard and tell them about the North Pole and my reindeer and, slowly but surely, I see the belief coming back into their eyes. Maintaining that sense of magic is the most important thing; there is nothing better than spotting a child I have known for a few years and watching them run from a distance into my arms."

Following my stint as Santa Claus, or something like him, I was sweating from the heavy suit and beard, and felt beaten. Reliving the thrill of Christmas through all those captivated children was fulfilling, but it was also daunting because I was constantly aware of the delicacy of a child's imagination; trying not to crack it was utterly exhausting.

I don't know how the real Santa does it.

THOMAS FALKNER

Jingle bells, Jingle bells
Diamonds all the way...

SHIMANSKY