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HOLIDAY SEASON



COURTESY MIKE CHING
Hana and Chian Donovan warmed to Mike Ching's Father Christmas immediately during a recent photo shoot at the Olde Spaghetti Factory in Ward Warehouse.

Out with the old Santa, in with the new

[STORY SUMMARY »](#)

By **Nadine Kam**
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There's more to playing Santa than simply donning a Santa suit. Just ask Mike Ching, who's been playing

the big guy since he was 8 years old, though, he admits, not always as well as he'd like.

In fact, he remembered being crushed by seeing photos of himself that year, in a cotton-ball beard held together by tape, looking less like jolly Santa and more like himself.

He'd wanted to surprise his brother and sisters, who only wondered "why Santa had shrunk and sounded like me."

That was the earliest hint he was destined for the stage, and in addition to studying theater at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and performing as a magician, he apprenticed with one of Hawaii's best-known Santas, Len Piper, whose "real job" was puppeteer and industrial designer.

Ching has learned a lot from playing Santa over the years, a task he takes seriously because of St. Nick's importance to little ones.

Most important, he says, is to never break character. Even 80-year-olds turn giggly, he says, when greeted with a "Hello, I haven't seen you for a while, young lady."

Informed that 87 isn't young, Ching will reply, "Well, when you're more than 378 years old, everybody else is young!"

Parents can help at parties by placing name tags on children so Santa can greet them by name. "Kids really love it when Santa knows their name, because only a real Santa would know."

Other details include trying to smell like Santa, including chewing mints and misting himself with cinnamon spray so he smells like cookies and candy to the child sitting on his lap.

And he always asks the child to whisper what they want into his ear, so parents can get the perfect snapshot.

He probably has enough tips to fill a small Santa guidebook, but perhaps one of the most important details is to bring an extra pair of pants.

"Frightened or excitable kids can sometimes, uh, leak."



COURTESY PACIFIC PHOTO CO.

[FULL STORY »](#)

By Nadine Kam

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Those who opt for stage careers grow accustomed to playing many roles, so it's no surprise that during the holidays, magician Mike Ching finds himself donning a Santa suit for productions beyond his usual gig. He's been portraying Santa since he was an 8-year-old who had heard rumblings that Santa wasn't real.

"I thought that was an outrageous lie, and I thought that by playing the part of Santa, I could bring him back to the world.

"I don't think I was very good at it. I just walked around and did what I thought Santa would do. I thought he was just a big, jolly guy."

If Ching never doubted Santa's authenticity, he certainly never doubted the costume: the two-piece red suit trimmed with white fur, the wide black belt and boots, and the pointy cap with the white snowy pompom at its tip. It was an image of Santa created by artist Haddon Sundblom for Coca-Cola in 1931. He created a new Santa illustration for the company almost every year through 1964, and the ubiquity of the advertising campaign sealed the image of the jolly man in red in every child's memory.

Then, about three years ago, Ching started noticing a new Santa.

"These carved, crafted dolls of Father Christmas started popping up at craft stores and craft fairs, and I thought, 'Where did they come from?' I don't think the people selling them knew too much about them, but I'd been portraying Santa for a long time and these looked really cool."



COURTESY PACIFIC PHOTO CO.
Illustrations by Kathe James show the evolution of Ching's Father Christmas costume.



COURTESY PACIFIC PHOTO CO.
Mike Ching's former Santa suit is based on an image of Santa that dates to a 1931 Coca-Cola ad campaign.

Ching started researching the figures and tied their appearance to the fall of the Russian communist state, which had repressed such religious figures as St. Nicholas. The fall of communism led to religious freedom and free enterprise, including the exportation of elaborate carved figures of St. Nicholas.

Ching thought Hawaii would be ready to welcome the old image of St. Nick, dressed in heavy robes, and contacted costume designer Kathe James, who's worked for Manoa Valley Theatre and numerous Waikiki productions, TV series and commercial advertising projects. She's currently doing wardrobe management for "The Lion King."

"Kathe's really, really in demand and really busy, but she was really interested in the idea and I gave her a bunch of images. From there we'd go back and forth on what he should look like."

From James' point of view, creating Father Christmas was a dream job because Ching's mind-set was that the look was everything. He didn't care about anything practical like comfort, wearability, weight or durability.

"The suit is not cloth. It's more like upholstery. It's not comfortable at all and it weighs 40 pounds. It broke the hanger.

"Kathe went to antique shops, Ross, swap meet to find anything that had the old 17th-century look we were going for. The buttons are really shower stall ornaments that had the scroll pattern we were looking for."

Although friends warned that children would be afraid of this new Santa, Ching said that's not the case.



COURTESY PACIFIC PHOTO CO.

In re-creating old St. Nick, costumer Kathe James said, "I would love for people to want to learn more about the history of the Christmas traditions that created this character -- to be transported to another time and place ... and to remember the types of simple gifts that used to be given to children in times past." A key element of Santa's bag is a small Christmas tree. "We realized he wasn't just bringing toys, he was bringing Christmas," Mike Ching said.

"Modern kids are not very easily intimidated. I think they're more disappointed by an inexpensive suit," he said. "I think most kids are on the fence as far as belief in Santa Claus, so when they see something elaborate, they're more invested in it emotionally.

"When you look authentic, children tell you things you don't expect. Sometimes pre-teenagers will come back when their friends aren't around and say things like, 'I know you're not the real Santa, but can you bring my mom and dad back together?' They really open up to this guy, so it's a really big responsibility."

Mike Ching will be appearing as Father Christmas at various private parties through the season. For more information, visit his Web site at www.MikeChingMagic.com.

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