

Exit the clowns After clowning around for five years, the - Bumblinni Brothers are moving on

Daily Herald (Arlington Heights, IL) - Friday, April 15, 2005

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"Arrivederci Bumblinnis!"

@* @* @* out of four

Location: The Actors Gymnasium, Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., Evanston

Times: 7:30 p.m. Friday; 4 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday; 2:30 p.m. Sunday through May 1

Running time: Approximately 90 minutes, including intermission

Tickets: \$10-\$15

Box office: (312) 409-3527

Rating: Suitable for all ages

Had Chuck Stubbings been less persistent, and Paul Kalina less adventurous, the Bumblinni Brothers would have never gotten off the ground.

Fortunately, enthusiasm and fearlessness prevailed and they soared. Literally.

But next month, the pratfalls and puns comes to an end when the high-flying, back-flipping, whip-cracking, fire-juggling duo calls it quits.

When their hugely entertaining, family friendly "Arrivederci Bumblinnis!" closes May 1, the Brothers Bumblinni will amicably dissolve their five-year professional partnership so their alter egos can pursue other interests: Stubbings will become a firefighter with the Mount Prospect Fire Department and Kalina will pursue a Masters of Fine Arts at California's famed Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theater.

Still, looking to the future makes these actor- acrobats/comedian-clowns nostalgic about the past.

"I'll miss the playing," said Kalina, who compared the show to a Warner Bros. cartoon, where satire underscores the goofiness. "This is the only place I do this style of clowning."

Nowhere else could they play and get paid for it.

"It's so much fun," he said. "For me it's a great joy when you crack your partner up."

"What a great thing to do for a living."

"We have a blast," said Stubbings. "Every time we do the show, there's something that makes me laugh."

If their Marx Brothers-inspired show were a musical, it would be called "A Day at the Circus, A Night of Vaudeville."

The impressive, 90-minute celebration of circus arts incorporates slapstick, sleight of hand, skill tricks (a graceful display of Polynesian fire swinging makes for a truly lovely segment),

improvisation, audience participation and, of course, clowning, which involves more than sight gags and punchlines.

Like good acting, good clowning conveys truth, but on a larger- than-life scale.

"Clowning is much more difficult than acting," said Stubbings, who has worked at Chicago Shakespeare, Court and Goodman theaters. "For me, clowning is comic acting."

"You can be a bad actor and still act. If you're a bad actor and you try to do theatrical clowning, you're in real trouble.

"This seems to be really pure and really honest," he said. "If that's what performing is supposed to be, this is it."

"I think we raised a helluva bar," said Kalina, not immodestly.

He's right. The show delights, thanks to its quick and clever stars.

Kalina and Stubbings, who both studied traditional, physical and clown theater, met in New York City while training for the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit, a theatrical troupe that entertains hospital-bound children. Back in Chicago, they met again as members of the Clown Care Unit at the University of Chicago Children's Hospital.

Recognizing a kindred spirit, Stubbings, a veteran of the Ringling Bros. & Barnum and Bailey Circus, approached Kalina about putting together an act. Kalina, co-founder of Chicago's 500 Clown, declined. Stubbings persisted.

"I've got a name," he told Kalina, "The Bumblinni Brothers."

It was a name Kalina couldn't refuse and a partnership ensued.

Stubbings suggested they incorporate Russian plank (a teeter- board consisting of a plank over a barrel) that he had performed with Ringling Bros. For Stubbings, who learned acrobatics at clown college in Baraboo, Wis., it meant a refresher course. For Kalina, who had no acrobatic or gymnastic training, it meant learning to do a double back flip at the age of 32.

"He was very persuasive. And thank God he was, because I love flying," said Kalina.

After initially collaborating with the Flying Griffin Circus at the Actors Gymnasium, an Evanston circus and performing arts school, the brothers developed a full-length show (the first of three), assisted by director/writer Kevin Theis.

"In every great duo - Abbott and Costello, Laurel and Hardy - there's a @#1 and a @#2," said Theis, referring to the straight man-comedian combination. "The problem was, they were both trying to be @#2."

After helping define roles, Theis, who directed productions at City Lit, Lifeline and greasy joan & co., turned to the story.

"The material was there," said Theis, referring to the physical stunts and sketches Kalina and Stubbings had developed, "but there was no overriding plot line."

Once they had a plot (the brothers must come up with a new act so they can return to Italy and join the family circus), the only things left to write were the gags, said Theis.

"Basically it was a show with shtick," said Stubbings. "With (Theis), it became a piece of theater."

But theater with an edge.

If the tricks seem risky, it's because they are, or they would be if less-skilled performers attempted them.

"We're doing things they (the Bumblinnis) should never be doing," said Kalina with a laugh.

"It's a calculated risk," added Stubbings. "We want people to think it's dangerous."

So far playing bumblers hasn't harmed either of them, but it has enhanced the respect they have for each other.

"What Paul brings is consummate professionalism," said Stubbings. "He'll never do anything partway."

"Chuck has enormous heart," said Kalina.

That, plus talent and dedication allowed them to soar. And that's what will keep them on course now that they're flying solo.

Caption: Chicago actors Paul Kalina, left, and Chuck Stubbings draw upon comedic conventions - including the classic pie-in-the-face - in their final show, "Arrivederci Bumblinnis!" Mark Welsh/Daily Herald Polynesian fire-swinging display makes for one of the show's loveliest and most graceful moments. Mark Welsh/Daily Herald After the show closes, clown-turned-firefighter Chuck Stubbings will trade bungee cords for fire hoses as a member of the Mount Prospect Fire Department. Mark Welsh/Daily Herald Whip smart. Paul Kalina won't stop clowning after the Bumblinnis take their final bow. The Chicago actor heads to California to pursue an MFA in physical theater. Mark Welsh/Daily Herald GRAPHIC/MAP: Noyes Cultural Arts Center/Evanston

Edition: Cook, DuPage, F1, F2, F3, Lake, McHenry

Section: Time Out!

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Column: On the town

Record Number: 793389

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