

Sibling revelry - Bumblinni Brothers get physical with comedy

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The Bumblinni Brothers Show

?176-129? Opens tonight, to Sept. 8

?176-129? The Actors Gymnasium, 927 Noyes, Evanston

?176-129? Tickets, \$10

Physical theater in Chicago is a varied lot. There are the otherworldly, and often stunning, efforts of the troupe Plasticene, the visually diverse work of Lookingglass Theatre and the high-flying stunts of Midnight Circus and the Flying Griffin Circus.

There are even a few solo acts, one of which, the Bumblinni Brothers, is striking out on its own.

The Bumblinni Brothers are an offshoot of the Flying Griffin Circus, which is an offshoot of the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, an organization founded in the fall of 1995 as a training ground for the "new American theater"--a theater as likely to express itself in backflips as dialogue.

Paul Kalina and Chuck Stubbings are Tony and Tony, the well-meaning but inept Bumblinni Brothers. The act, which is making its solo debut in a seven-week run at the Actors Gymnasium, is filled with high-energy acrobatics, fire juggling, audience participation, whip-cracking, slapstick comedy and the death-defying Boardinni of Doom.

Kalina and Stubbings, both in their 30s, started out as actors and became enamored of physical theater along the way. Kalina has studied mask movement extensively, clowning and physical theater; Stubbings traveled as a clown with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus for a year. They met in Chicago while auditioning for the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit at the University of Chicago Children's Hospital, a venture they continue to participate in several days a week.

Stubbings says their Bumblinni Brothers act "pushes the bounds of physical limits." It's also filled with a lot of laughs and pokes fun at the rituals of the circus. Each came to the act with expertise in an offbeat art--Stubbings juggles fire; Kalina has a whip act. Neither, however, knew anything about circus acrobatics.

"We studied for a year with a Russian coach and learned some impressive moves," said Stubbings, before he and Kalina answered a few questions about their alter egos and putting on a show.

Q. What's the story behind the Bumblinni Brothers?

Stubbings: They come from a long line of circus people. Their only problem is that they aren't very good. They're bumblers, circus misfits.

Kalina: It runs in the family. Their father didn't have the circus flair, either; he wound up cleaning the animal cages. But Tony and Tony want to continue the legacy, much to their family's chagrin.

Q. How would you describe the show?

Stubbings: Well, it's not a clown show in the way you would think of a clown show. We aren't doing balloon animals. (Laughs). And it's not a circus in the way you would think of a circus. I guess you could call it physical theater Chicago-style. It's filled with our take on classic slapstick, sort of the Marx Brothers meet the circus.

Q. Is this a family show?

Stubbings: It's a great family show with a lot of that Bugs Bunny-type of humor. Lots of stuff for parents that the kids won't get.

Q. Why are both brothers named Tony?

Kalina: We started out playing with other names but one day we just looked at each other and said, "Tony and Tony." It was stupid and funny; it worked.

Q. Can you each describe your version of your Tony?

Kalina: My Tony wants to be a world famous acrobat and make his grandfather proud. The only problem is, he's afraid of heights.

Stubbings: I'm the older brother, desperately trying to get the younger brother to help me become famous.

Kalina: They mess everything up trying to do everything right. Chuck's character is trying to keep them alive. His only problem is that he's saddled with me.

Q. What's the show's biggest challenge?

Stubbings: Making all the stunts and tricks look as if they've happened by accident and make it look like we don't know what we're doing. To make fun of something you have to perfect it first, and that took a lot of training.

Q. What is the Boardinni of Doom? Sounds dangerous.

Stubbings: It is dangerous. It's our spoof on the classic Russian teeterboard act. As the storyline in the show goes, it's the act that nearly killed all the family. But the boys think the show is going so well they decide to bring it back.

Q. The whip act sounds dangerous. How did you come up with that idea?

Kalina: I created this act with another friend who was a Hula-Hoop artist. I practiced a lot and beat myself to death with a whip for a while. Now I'm trying to develop new tricks with it.

Q. What's the secret to juggling with fire?

Stubbings: Being very, very careful. (Laughs) Fortunately, I learned from someone who was very good. One of the reasons we chose these acts is because how funny would it be for these bumbling idiots to play with something they shouldn't even go near.

Q. Does the audience enjoy the participation part?

Kalina: The key is you have to do it with a great deal of respect. We have to make the participant look better than us and in return make us look like the idiots. That can be difficult to master.

Stubbings: We learned a lot about that working with the children in the hospital.

Q. So, you enjoy working with the Clown Care Unit?

Stubbings: It really is incredibly rewarding and sets your priorities straight. We got into being performers to do something special, and doing this you know you have done just that. Right there in the hospital room, when you succeed you do it big and when you fail you fail big.

Kalina: It's rewarding to be part of people's lives. We're allowed into a very private and very unique part of the family's and the patient's life. And, in turn, what the kids teach us is phenomenal.

Caption: Paul Kalina (front) and Chuck Stubbings are the Bumblinni Brothers.

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