

Washington Times

ENTERTAINMENT

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Making a world from nothing

By Raymond M. Lane
SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Kids are sprawling, laughing, in an auditorium filled with families and children.

The racing, madcap antics of "The Nicolo Whimsey Show" is probably something they've never seen before: insane juggling, merry music, flute and musical-saw playing and character acting more outlandish than a Saturday morning cartoon.

There are a fire-dancing chicken, rope walking and sing-alonging. Flying through the air in tight circles are juggled Indian clubs, hammers, torches, hats and blobs of play putty the size of Big Macs.

All of this is seamlessly melded into a flawless, heart-quickenning unity done so fast the 45-minute set leaves parent and child breathless for more. It's "environmental theater" taken about as far to the edge as it can be for children.

Behind it all is a quiet couple from Brandywine, Md., in southern Prince George's County, Nick Newlin and Joanne Flynn.

"It's theater," Mr. Newlin says in a husky, post-performance voice. "Something about it is so pure.

"It creates a new world out of nothing and brings color and joy to an otherwise empty place. We performers do that, creating an instant happy community that you're responsible for bringing together."

"Hmm," Miss Flynn says after a while. The quiet one with a science degree from Cornell University, onstage she plays Harpo to Mr. Newlin's Groucho. Matter-of-factly, she adds that both feel "kind of blessed in certain ways for having this kind of life."

And so it goes at the couple's 8-acre spread in Brandywine called Oakey Dokey Acres, where they practice about five hours a day. They have a 300-pound pig named Venus, who when performing rolls out a red carpet with her nose and delivers a bouquet of roses to the Queen of Whimsey.

Roderick the fire-dancing



Nick Newlin and Joanne Flynn, stars of "The Nicolo Whimsey Show," practice togetherness and juggling on their Brandywine property.

chicken is, of course, a rooster. Three mules named Fritz, Applejack and Agnes, as well as Bingo the donkey, are featured performers when the duo play at area Renaissance festivals.

"That's where we met," says Mr. Newlin, who has a Harvard degree in psychology and is working on his master's degree in theater from the University of Maryland. "She was stilt-walking, I remember, and, of course, we immediately fell in love."

They went to Europe for a while as street-performing jugglers, musicians and clowns.

"Not that it was all roses," Mr. Newlin says. "Street performing is an interesting occupation because it brings both the great highs and lows of theater.

"On one hand, it's the most magic organic form of entertainment possible, when huge hordes of perfect strangers have a good time and pay you a lot of money. Then again, when it's windy and cold, you're standing on the street corner and people walk by just staring at you, that's when a Harvard grad may reconsider his life choices in a different light."

Still, he also directs Shakespeare at the Banneker High

WHAT: "The Nicolo Whimsey Show"

WHEN: 1 p.m. today

WHERE: First United Methodist Church, 6201 Belcrest Road, Hyattsville

PHONE: 301/277-0302

TICKETS: \$6

School Summer Shakespeare Festival. She had a bit part in "Her Alibi" with Tom Selleck, and both play minor roles in "Washington Square," a film shot in Baltimore with Jennifer Jason-Leigh and Albert Finney to be released early next year.

They've had small parts in operas at the Kennedy Center. He plays piano and accordion in a wildly eclectic band called "Jarnation" at the Layhill Cafe in Wheaton.

As for their future, Mr. Newlin says the goal is "to continue to perform for kids and families, building on the educational value of this kind of theater. We're working up a residency program for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Hagerstown, teaching them circus skills and juggling."

After all, Mr. Newlin admits, "there's no jugglerymen's compensation."