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Spiky street performer great at spearing his flying cabbages

Patience needed for audience awaiting comic's 45-second trick

Ben Gelinias, The Edmonton Journal
Published: Tuesday, July 11, 2006

EDMONTON - Why would a University of Toronto engineering grad spend most of this week on Churchill Square launching a cabbage from a home-made catapult, if only to pierce the plummeting vegetable with his spiked helmet? Because a head of lettuce would explode on impact, of course.

Melons are too heavy.

"Really heavy," Mike Wood says. "And messy."

He has tried endives, but gave up on the leafy-green chicory because of their particularly erratic flight pattern, settling instead for ugly, dependable cabbage.

Cabbage heads are dense, so they stick, and they're cheap, spherical, and easy to find. "I've been getting them at Save On Foods at cost."

This is Wood's third year at the Edmonton International Street Performers Festival. The 28-year-old performer calls it "the best fest in the world."

"It's a smart audience that's well-educated from a comedy point of view," he says.

His act's combination of observational stand-up humour, anticipatory slapstick, and its ironic final gag goes over particularly well here.

"Everyone gets it. It's like there's this memo that goes out or something."

Wood requires a good deal of patience from his audience.

"The show is a 45-second trick," he says, drawn out to about the length of your average television sitcom.

Like good prime-time comedy, he says, "it's far more entertaining than it probably should be."

Wood has travelled as far as New Zealand with his act.

In Singapore, he recalls the trouble he had finding the right head of cabbage for the show. Those at the market specifically marked "round," were "round in the sense that a coin is round," he says.

They were shrink-wrapped and \$14 each. "Like flying pancakes."

Wood often has trouble flying himself, given his arsenal.

He has had many tools confiscated.

"Am I going to get through security" he often worries. "Y'know, because I've got a catapult."

Wood designed and built the metre-long cabbage launcher, made from aircraft grade aluminum, after his first wooden catapult proved increasingly hard to move from festival to festival.

The metal version, which he calls the "Mark II," comes apart before every flight. Same goes for the detachable spikes he screws atop a snazzy vintage '70s motorcycle helmet, bought on EBay.

Wood says street performing is equal parts art and science. The performance is the art. The science is the preparation and thought behind the act.

He has timed his show so not a minute goes by without a laugh.

A lack of laughter, however captivating a show may be, can kill a performer's ability to draw new onlookers who might happen by.

From outside the spectator's circle, no laughter sounds like nothing's going on.

Wood's act also benefits from an element of surprise.

Sure, most people watch his show knowing how it will end: with that all-too-predictable impaling of a catapulted cabbage on the helmet. But most have no idea what it will look like until they see it for themselves, when a volunteer is asked to yank on the string that sends a poor, unsuspecting cabbage airborne towards its gory end.

"This is how I put myself through school," Wood says.

Lately, the performer, skinny enough to just barely fit through the mouth of a tennis racquet (if you remove the wires and his wallet), does well enough money-wise that he can move comfortably between choice mining contracts and favourite Street Performers festivals.

"I don't have to do birthday parties, and I don't have to go underground if I don't feel like it," he says.

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