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ARTS

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

By CAROLYN NIKODYM

Contortionists and whimsy abound at Edmonton's Street Performers Festival

The first street performer I remember seeing was in Quebec City. He was this tall, lanky guy with a shock of red hair who would imitate people, get in their faces—he even emptied out this woman's purse and commented on the contents. His performance was shocking because he was so completely, and hilariously, over the top. My family and I still mimic the way he'd roll his "r's" for an eternity and how he'd pronounce "impressed" like "im-prrrress-said." So it was with anticipation that my boyfriend and I ventured to the Street Performers Festival last Saturday, and judging from the hundreds of people there, we weren't the only ones wondering what a comedy engineer was or how the heck someone was going to do a flying trapeze in Sir Winston Churchill Square.



Wanting to bring aerial ability to the street, Robin Szuch and Stacy Clark of Toronto's High Strung, with their portable swing, fit right in with the circus atmosphere that was palpable in the Square. Their act was somewhat of a good cop/bad cop setup, with Szuch playing the eager-to-please performer and Clark acting out the diva. According to Clark, they have several different routines, some in which they use a lot of banter with the audience and others that are tightly choreographed to music. While they made a show of explaining their apparatus and how it works, that paled in comparison to what tricks they could do on it, hanging off the swing and each other in all sorts of upside down and all around positions; their show could have used less talk and more action—Clark and Szuch's flying talent really speaks for itself.

Comedy engineer Mike Wood, meanwhile, also hailing from Toronto, really worked the funnybone with his one-man freakshow—no doubt his family is pleased that he has used his engineering education to build a catapult with which to hurl cabbages at his head. Although that's freaky enough, his greater asset is the searing wit he used to play with his audience. After apologizing for being from Toronto (explaining that it wasn't his fault—it was just the place his parents were at when the brownies kicked in), he added that one of the pluses to being from Ontario was that his vote counted. Wood also made a great show of arming the catapult, enlisting some brave volunteers to help him entertain, but after the serious ribbing they took, which had the rest of the audience in stitches, the whole cabbage-hurling bit just ended up being a way (albeit a funny way) to end his show.

Of all the performances, though, the highlight had to be Alakazam, otherwise known as Al "The Human Knot" Millar. Coming to Edmonton from Sydney, Australia, the lanky Millar was able to bend his body in all sorts of improbable ways. Using verbal and physical comedy to wonderful affect, he completely engaged the audience with his antics, knowing full well that once he brought his clasped hands over his head from behind his back, he'd have us eating out of the palm of his hand—threading his body through an unstrung racquet and juggling knives while standing on a 10-foot pole was just icing on his performance cake.

The whole Square oozed of whimsy, with wacky clowns and performers of all stripes—we didn't even need to watch a specific performance to find something to laugh at. But after catching several others acts, we walked away totally im-prrrress-said. **V**

Edmonton International Street Performers Festival

Sir Winston Churchill Square • Until July 17