

# 3

## IT'S A RENAISSANCE FESTIVAL, THEY'RE NOT EXPECTING ANYTHING GOOD

*I didn't like the play, but I saw it under  
adverse conditions. The curtain was up.*

~ Groucho Marx

**OLD JOKE:** Why do some people take an instant aversion to festival performers? It saves time.

Early Renaissance festivals were similar to current ones in one important respect: the level of talent was all over the map. You could find a very bad rope walker sweating hard just to stay on a slack rope strung between two trees, and ... you could round the corner and encounter Avner the Eccentric.

You could watch a bad juggler explaining in tortuous detail how long it took him to learn his craft: "...and please, kids, have some respect for the difficulty of the trick I'm about to perform for your enjoyment ..." and you could stroll to the other side of the grounds and discover the Flying Karamazov Brothers.

A common tactic with some festivals over the years was to stock the stages and lanes with unexceptional entertainment and unremarkable acts that would work for little or nothing, but feature

one or two strong, professional shows that were supposed to make customers feel like they hadn't been *totally* ripped off.

Not that there isn't nominal entertainment value in watching a knife juggler stand on the front lip of the stage, warn the audience wryly to "put your children in front of you," then accidentally let one of the daggers fly out into the fourth row as audience members leap out of the way to avoid being skewered. We saw it happen in Seattle.

Not that there isn't unintended hilarity in a husband and wife duo performing a chair-balancing routine at a harvest festival in San Francisco, and at the last moment when the unfortunate woman manages to finally climb atop the highest chair twelve feet off the stage, we hear a huge crash, an audible gasp from the audience, a momentary silence, then a cheerful cry from the husband: "She's all right, ladies and gentlemen! And she's going to try it again!"

Not that there isn't an eerie sense of impending artistic doom in watching a rail-thin actor and a well-upholstered actress perform an interminable and thunderous scene from *Taming of the Shrew* for an audience made up entirely of an unsuspecting family of four on a hot day in Phoenix, and before the poor man and his brood can get to the exit, see them corralled and harassed for gratuities: "Oh please, sir, this is how we make our living; how about a dollar? We need to eat."

But the truly excellent shows we encountered over the years could make you forget all that. At one time at the Minnesota festival in the seventies, you could see The Flying Karamazov Brothers, Avner the Eccentric, Michael Hennessey, The Ochawi Dancers, and Penn & Teller.

Joe and I always felt that Renaissance festivals were the retro vaudeville houses of the early 1900s. According to the old comedians and performers who remember it, vaudeville was always hit or miss. You paid a dime to walk into a darkened theater and watch whoever happened to be in town that week. You could stay as long as you

wanted; sometimes you'd see something memorable, often you'd leave wondering how these people ever made a living.

Comedy clubs today are much the same. Anybody who's been to a comedy club in the past twenty years knows you have to sit through two or three "openers" and "features," who are still working on being funny, before you actually get to see the headliner. He's a headliner because he finally figured out what's funny and what's just white noise.

The Great Sven had a classic vaudeville routine that made him a headliner and a good living over a long lifetime on the stage.

The story goes that a young soldier, home from Europe just after V-E day, was strolling the streets of New York City, reveling in his successful return from the war, when he saw a sign above a doorway on a side street in Greenwich Village: "TONIGHT, ONE SHOW ONLY, 8 PM, THE GREAT SVEN, 25 CENTS."

Glancing at his watch and seeing it was almost show time, the soldier decided to see a real New York show his first night home. He walked in, bought a ticket and sat down in one of the few remaining seats. The place was packed. Within moments, the lights dimmed and a voice announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the greatest vaudeville performer in history, The Great Sven!"

The place went crazy, people leaped to their feet and the curtain opened, revealing a small table with three walnuts carefully lined up on top of it. From out of the wings walked a withered, gnarled old man in a full-length cape.

With a wave of his hand, he silenced the crowd. A drum roll, and . . . he released a snap. The cape fell to the ground; he was stark naked, his rather impressive member hanging limply in a perfectly positioned small spotlight. Another drum roll, and . . . the Great Sven grabbed the appendage and in three smooth, lightning-quick motions, broke all three walnuts with it. An instant standing ovation.

The curtain closed; the lights came up, and the crowd filed out. The soldier was stunned. An amazing performance, well worth the price of admission.

Fast-forward thirty years. The same soldier is back in New York City, on a sentimental visit to his old post-war haunts. He finds himself in the same neighborhood, glances down a side street and can't believe his eyes: the sign above the doorway reads: "TONIGHT, ONE SHOW ONLY, 8 PM, THE GREAT SVEN, \$10"

Unwilling to believe what he's seeing, the soldier enters the theater, pays the ten dollars and sits down in a once-again packed house. The lights dim and a voiceover announces: "Ladies and gentlemen, a big round of applause for the longest-running show in New York, The Great Sven!"

Once again, tremendous applause as the curtain opens, a table with three coconuts on it sits in the center of the stage, and an impossibly shriveled old man steps out in a long cape and, with a commanding wave of his hand, calls for silence. A drum roll . . . the snap is released; the cape falls away; a spotlight hits his inert member . . . another drum roll and, with one smooth motion, the Great Sven grabs the ready weapon and cracks open each coconut, one at a time. Standing ovation as the curtain closes.

The soldier sits there lost in thought, not grasping what seems impossible. As the crowd heads for the exit, the soldier sneaks backstage, sees what looks like a dressing room and knocks on the door.

"Come in."

The soldier pushes open the door and there, sitting on a stool in front of a dressing table, is the oldest man he has ever seen.

"What can I do for ya, sonny?"

The soldier stammers, but finally manages to say, "Sir, I was here in this very theater thirty years ago right after V-E day, and I watched an old man do this same show using three walnuts. It seems

ridiculous, because that man was very old back then, but . . . are you the same Great Sven I saw in 1945?”

“I certainly am.”

“I can’t believe it. How old are you?”

“I’m 110 this month.”

“Amazing! Why did you switch from walnuts to coconuts?”

“Son, in my business, the eyes are the first things to go.”

Your challenge, should you choose to repeat this story, is to tell it in under a minute. It can be done. But to keep from seriously exasperating your friends and relatives, it *must* be done.

One of Joe’s favorite vaudeville stories concerned the legendary Professor Lumberti. Much in demand at vaudeville houses across the country back in the day, the Professor was a one-trick pony. But what a trick!

He walked out onstage with a xylophone, put it down and announced: “Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Professor Lumberti, and I am going to play this xylophone.”

A wall of boos would cascade down.

“I repeat; I am going to play this xylophone for your entertainment. I’m going to play ‘Listen to the Mockingbird.’ It’s the only song I know. But I’m going to play it so well, so perfectly, that you will give me a standing ovation when I’m finished!”

More boos, louder and more threatening than ever. The professor picked up the sticks, and as he played the first notes of ‘Listen to the Mockingbird,’ a curtain opened behind him, revealing an absolutely stunning woman, who immediately began removing her clothes to the music. The applause began, built to a crescendo and, just as the professor hit the final note, her last item of clothing sailed off into the wings.

The audience sprang to its feet in the predicted standing ovation, a big smile appeared on the professor's face and he said, "Thank you! You wanna hear it again?"

It seemed to us that the professor had the perfect act. It had everything: music, comedy, nudity, and brevity. Sadly, over the many years we worked on our little show, we only managed to achieve one out of four. And some days we got shut out.

Jimmy would understand.