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Couple to perform musical storytelling

by Lindsay Hoepfner · September 22, 2010

Puppetry runs throughout Johanna Hongell-Darsee's blood.

Literally.

Now, she, along with her husband, Scott Darsee, is bringing her talent to West Liberty for the 14th annual Children's Festival on Saturday.

Puppetry can be traced back in Johanna's genealogy to her grandmother, Monica Leo, who was a famed European curator of the art form (not West Liberty's Eulenspiegel puppeteer).

"The first television show in Finland featured Monica and her story," said Scott, who is originally from Cedar Rapids. "You can go to museums and see some of her work."

While Johanna picked up her grandmother's passion for the theatrical art form, she put her own twist on the creative field.

After obtaining an education in mime and theatre at the Lecoq School in Paris, France, Johanna went on to study classical Indian dance and mime in Chennai, India. Over the years, she has developed a style of performing with elements from mime, theater, and dance, inspired by her educational upbringing, combined with storytelling.

Now, Johanna and Scott, who reside in Albuquerque, N.M., tour the world, performing selections for their original storytelling theater repertoire.

Monica Leo of West Liberty's Eulenspiegel Puppet Theatre recently learned about Johanna's grandmother, and invited the couple to perform at this year's Children's Festival in homage to the elder puppeteer of the same name.

The show Scott and Johanna plan to perform at the downtown West Liberty festival, deemed "The Rosemary Plant," is an Italian folk tale.

"It's a transformation tale, and all ages will really appreciate it," Scott said. "It's one of our most magical performances."

"We've performed it all over, for young kids to general audiences to senior citizens," Johanna added.

While Scott and Johanna typically draw inspiration from traditional folk tales, Johanna's educational background in Indian has encouraged the duo to perform some classical east Indian mythological tales.

"We like finding stories that you can sometimes find in many different cultures — stories that are universal," Johanna said. "But instead of finding stories that are very traditional and predictable, we try to find stories with a little twist or some kind that will keep people guessing until the end."

The couple begin their performances by having Johanna tell the story and paint the images in the minds of audience members. Scott, meanwhile, works up music to portray different themes and characters.

“I mainly use guitar, but I use a lot of different string instruments,” Scott said. “Johanna plays the flute and uses vocals.”

In the instance of “The Rosemary Plant,” Scott uses effect pedals to create the full landscape, albeit the basis of the story is performed on guitar.

“I try to create an orchestral landscape on the guitar,” he said.

Children’s Festival attendees will have the opportunity to experience Scott and Johanna’s musical storytelling at 2:10 p.m. Saturday, at Ron-de-Voo Park.

“We’re really looking forward to this unique little festival,” Johanna said. “We’re also really looking forward to seeing [Monica’s] work, and meeting up with her and the other performers.”

“It will be great to return to Iowa and perform for a whole new audience,” Scott added. “It’s really an honor to have been invited by Monica to perform, because what we’re doing is a little outside the box.”

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