

Local Circus Performer Talks Fire-Breathing, Sword-Swallowing and More

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
February 9 2024 4:04 PM



ALTON - Believe it or not, for professionals like Thomas Nealeigh, fire-eating is easier than it looks.

“Fire eating, in a way, is one of the easiest acts to learn. But it is the most difficult one to master,” the performer said. “And you continually work with it and you have to keep in mind that at some point you’re going to catch on fire.”

Nealeigh would know. He tells the story of a bad performance where the wind changed and the fire singed off his eyebrow and burned his chin. Ever the professional, he slathered on some burn ointment and lit up to perform the trick again — and quickly realized that burn ointment is flammable.

This is part of the job for FreakShow Deluxe, the production company that Nealeigh helped start in 2001. The show travels all over the country, but Nealeigh and his family live in Alton, where he recently performed at Alton Little Theater before a production of “Elephant’s Graveyard.” He has a lot of fun as a performer with FreakShow Deluxe, even if he does get into some interesting positions.

“I own far more beds of nails than any one person should,” Nealeigh said. “One time I was on the bed of nails and I had three 300-pound wrestlers on top of me, and one of them slipped and fell. Bam, right down on top of me. I mean, it didn’t feel good. But I survived.”

And went on to perform the same trick again and again. Nealeigh has been performing since he was a child, first as a part of his parents’ traveling theater company, then as a musician.

In 2001, he was working with a theater company in Ohio that put on a popular Halloween attraction every fall. With people waiting in line for up to two hours to see the attraction, Nealeigh and a few others started performing circus tricks to keep them entertained. The tricks became so popular that they developed it into a standalone show, then took the show to Los Angeles, where they opened their own theater.

It didn’t take long for FreakShow Deluxe to spread. Nowadays, the performers travel all over the country to participate in fairs, festivals, Halloween shows and more. Nealeigh himself will be performing at the Oddities & Curiosities Expo in St. Louis in April, and he can’t wait.

“It’s been a wild ride,” he said. “Even when we started this in 2001, I certainly didn’t think that 24 years later I would still be doing it, but we hit on the right formula. And it’s worked, and it’s a formula that has longevity for being.”

Part of that longevity, Nealeigh notes, is not getting injured. He said sword-swallowing is the most dangerous trick he’s ever seen, but fire-breathing can have its risks, though

the performers try to be as safe as possible with fire extinguishers and fire blankets on both sides of the stage at all times.

Mostly, though, the best protection that FreakShow Deluxe has is each other. The performers take care of one another and make sure that everything is going according to plan. This family, Nealeigh said, is invaluable.

“And like all families, sometimes you fight,” he added. “But at the end of the day, you come together to sort of look out for each other.”

For more information about FreakShow Deluxe, visit FreakShowDeluxe.com to connect to their social media pages. Nealeigh and the rest of the troupe will keep traveling throughout the country, with many festivals, fairs and other attractions planned for the coming months. You can book them, but check out their pages to know what you’re getting into first.

“We’re not a children’s party magician,” Nealeigh warned. “Those guys have actual talent.”