

Elephant powered cruise stomps on some Hollywood pretensions

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

It must have been desperation that drove man to ride an elephant.

It couldn't have been common sense that led him and his successors to mount the grey lumbering beasts to look as if they needed a lifetime supply of moisturizer.

After a not-so-quick nor graceful leap around a sandy lot in Farmington on one of Owner Hill's cruises Thursday afternoon, I've come to the conclusion that all those smiling ladies wearing pith helmets in African safari movies must have been lying to me.

Either that or the smiles were really camouflaging a grimace.

It wasn't the height of my steed, a 16-year-old elephant named Tory, that I found so disconcerting. If you like dangling your feet from the sills of second-story windows, you ought to have absolutely no problem with the height of a pachyderm.

But the view left something to be desired.

Instead of surveying the Farmington Founder's Festival, I found myself

staring into back of an elephant's cranium.

AS SHE WALKED, Tory's head bobbed up and down, almost hypnotically. The two great hills in her cranium met in the middle of her head and created a little grey valley.

Fascinated, I stared at the coarse black hair that interrupted the monotony of Tory's all grey wardrobe.

Obviously with such rhythmic movements, there must have been deep elephant contemplation going on. But it was lost on me and the spectators.

If the rider can overcome these two minor annoyances, he only has to cope with the remaining difficulty—the actual ride.

Some enterprising circus owner will figure out a way to put shock absorbers on elephants. Until then, elephants are feasible transportation only for those possessing hardy spirits and even harder hind ends.

Riding an elephant feels like sitting on top of a bowl of jelly that is constantly jiggling. Add to that the sensation of sitting on the elephant's pro-

truding spine and movie buffs will realize why Tarzan usually stuck to vines as a mode of transportation.

Uncomfortable? Yes. Speedy? No. But if the elephant ever became a fixture on Grand River during rush hour, even drivers of speedy foreign cars would instantly recognize their place and slow down.

OWNER HILL takes a good natured look at the elephant as a mode of transportation.

"It's hard to ride," he admitted.

"Our chief performers ride behind the head instead of in the middle of the elephant. That's uncomfortable. You know you're going to fall but you don't know when."

Young riders seem to take a different view of the experience.

"I only lost two kids," said Hill, who has been driving his elephants for about 12 years.

"I once jumped off the elephant. He stood up on the back and gave a Tarzan yell and jumped. I fell bad about it but his father said 'Oh, he does that all the time,'" said Hill.

A little girl decided to do chin ups on the railing that surrounds the elephant saddle and slipped off the beast.

Such goings-on are born stoically by Tory and two other elephants owned by Hill.

"They are an animal that has fantastic patience," he said.

In addition, they have fantastic strength.

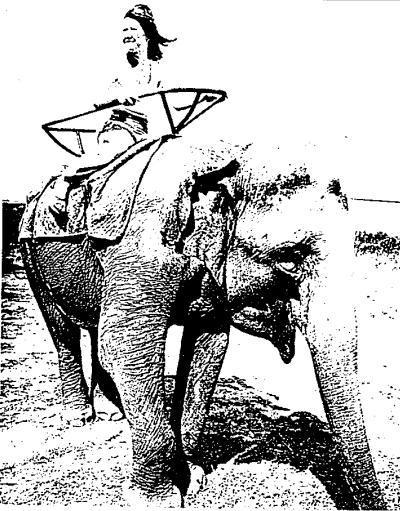
"They can carry about six or seven kids easily without tiring for about eight to 10 hours. They can carry about 1,000 pounds per load," he said.

ALTHOUGH THAT SOUNDS like a lot of weight to stick on an animal's back, it must be remembered that there's a lot of elephant to spread that weight around on.

On the average, a full grown female will weigh about 4,300 pounds. A male will weigh in at 6½ tons.

The lumbering creatures live on the average of 75 years. Their development roughly parallels that of humans, according to Hill.

That might be a comforting thought but I still wouldn't trust them with a jar of peanut butter.



Farmington Observer reporter Louise Okrutsky wishes she were in the comfort of her car rather than riding atop an elephant. She wondered if Mata Hari started this way.

Art, history combine in dance troupe

By ALLEN SCHLOSSBERG
and LOUISE OKRUTSKY

Jet lag, low stage ceilings and ham-burgers are part of life on tour for the Belgian dance troupe Alkuone.

Combining modern music and mime-dancing into a spectacle, the group continues the practice of the ancient art of flag waving.

As part of a nationwide tour, 70 members of the 180 person troupe performed recently at the Farmington Founders Festival.

Using gymnastics, mime and dance, they used flags as a part of their medium rather than as mere set decorations.

But that's the way the group's founder and director, Oscar van Malder, envisioned it when he first organized the group in 1967.

Van Malder, 50, a slight, athletically built man who talks earnestly about his group, was a teacher and a dancer before turning to choreography.

He was teaching physical education at the Vrije Technische Institute at Aalst, Belgium, when he began to consider the possibilities inherent in the medieval practice of elaborate, ritualized flag waving.

In medieval times, the flags were

waved in a certain order as part of a tribute to civic authorities, according to van Malder. These traditional exercises are still performed at important civic occasions in Austria, Spain, Italy, Belgium and Germany.

Alkuone van Malder says his troupe's movements are not direct copies of older ritual, the flag wavers' movements contain some formalized meaning.

Each area of Belgium has its own ritual method of flag waving. The movements and their meanings vary according to region.

Until 1970, only boys were admitted into the troupe which delivers van Malder's synthesis of history and art.

With women added to the troupe, the group is planning tours of the British Isles, Poland, Canada and Czechoslovakia.

One of the side affects of such an extensive undertaking is jet lag. The seven hour trip from Belgium to New York was aggravated by another 1½ hours in the air to Detroit.

BY THE TIME they drove to perform in Lansing, the group's sense of time was confused. While their audience was enjoying the afternoon,

the troupe was ready to call it a day. Touring also exposes the group to a wide variety of stages in differing states of repair.

The Downtown Farmington Center's main trailer stage has a low roof which may not bother other acts but presented a hazard to the Alkuone Alkuone. During one number which mimics the conditions of man in a mechanical world, the dancers take karate type leaps onto the stage.

"It's dangerous," the dancers whispered to each other. "Watch it when you jump."

But, overhanging roof or not, the dancers voted to give up their free time to add another performance to the Founders Festival. Van Malder took an informal vote of the young dancers before giving his answer to fest.

The request, greeted by smiles, was agreed to without debate.

"Naturally," smiled one delighted young lady.

The young stayed with Farmington even after the festival and adapted nicely to pizza and hamburgers. They were surprised by the large American breakfasts. They were expecting the usual Belgian breakfast of small rolls.

Photos by
Allen
Schlossberg

A DANCER with the Elza Darcil ballet school in Belgium, he integrated dance and gymnastics with a part of history.

In medieval times, the flags were

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Swirling flags and modern music are part of the pageantry exhibited by the Alkuone group.



A fighting posture is adopted by two man against machine. The troupe studies mime as well as dancing.

Olivet honors

Arvidson

Lorraine Arvidson of Farmington was named to the academic achievement list at Olivet College for the spring semester. A sophomore majoring in accounting, Ms. Arvidson is the daughter of Raymond Arvidson.

Schendens selected for leadership camp

Larry Schendens, of 2945 Gramercy Court, Farmington Hills, is one of 150 students selected to attend the National Leadership Training Center at Camp Myrtle Beach, S.C., this summer.

Schendens is a vice-president of the student council, a National Honor Society member and a varsity football letterman at Catholic Central High School.