

Kelly takes funny business seriously

By KATIE KERWIN

To Emmett Kelly Jr., clowning around is no joke.

"We've got to get out of here Sunday night after the show and drive back down to Indiana," he said. "Then we fly out to Utah for two days, then fly

back and pick up our truck to drive to New Jersey. After that, we go on to Washington."

Kelly sat in an office in the Birmingham Theater between shows on Nov. 24, still wearing the comically ragged outfit for his act. He looked extremely weary. As he recounted his travels of the past few weeks and those yet to come, it is easy to see why.

Cross-crossing the country with a circus is his business and he preferred discussing the trials and tribulations of his journeys to commenting on his career as a clown.

Kelly fired off a rapid series of replies to standard interview questions, not waiting for them to be asked.

"It takes me 25 minutes each time to put my makeup on.

"Yes, this is my outfit, not my dad's.

"Yes, he is still alive. He's not retired—he's semi-retired now.

"Yes, it's me on the commercials."

ALTHOUGH HIS FATHER is a famous clown, Kelly did not grow up travelling with a circus. "In them days, they didn't have those correspondence courses," he explained. "If you travelled with the show, you didn't get an education." The situation has improved since his childhood, he said. Now more circus children can travel with their parents and complete schooling by mail. The circus now numbers college graduates and professionals among its ranks, he said.

"I was a railroader for 10 years," Kelly said. "I went clowning in 1950." He formed the circus in 1972 and now does commercials, promotions and an occasional movie, in addition to circus work.

"You ain't going to believe this," he prefaced his account of how he was bitten by the clowning bug. "I saw Stan Kenton's band in Rochester, Jr. one night," he said, "and I got the urge to go into show business."

His wife serves as the circus' ringmistress, introducing acts and needing her husband, who entertains the audience with jokes and magic tricks while stage hands change props between acts.

"She never saw a circus until she met me," Kelly said. She joined the circus after meeting him and now travels with Kelly on all his trips.

Kelly voiced disgust for the direction in which large circuses seem to be moving, likening them to Las Vegas floorshows and Broadway productions. Circuses are becoming lost in all the glitter, glamor and casts of thousands, he said.

LIFE WITH A SMALL CIRCUS sounds like anything but glamor and luxury. Acts are booked independently for each show in a different town.

Besides an exhausting schedule of performances, the performers have to cope with cramped quarters and improvised arrangements for the leopards, panthers, bears, ponies and dogs that appear in the show.

"The big cats are 'not de-clawed and not de-toothed,'" Kelly said. The trainers have both been bitten a few times in the animal trailer. The close quarters make it easier for an animal to reach out a paw and snag a trainer walking by. Fortunately, the leopards and panthers are normally affectionate, Kelly said.

"They're funny, though," he added. "When you least expect it, they'll nab you."

KELLY SAID he has many stories to tell, although he is usually too busy to sit down and tell them. But the stories he does tell are not tales of cheering crowds and circus spotlights, or of meeting famous performers, or even of such noteworthy accomplishments as being the only circus to appear at the White House.

Given his choice, Kelly will talk about the people he works with and the headaches in transporting and coordinating an entire circus. He will discuss at length the homemade defrosting system he devised on a recent trip through an ice storm, the quirks of circus animals and the new home he and his wife are fixing in Florida.

But even off stage, the clown's humor, exaggerated gestures and facial expressions stay with Emmett Kelly Jr. Clowning, it would seem, is not just skin deep.



EMMETT KELLY, JR.



Therese and Teddy Beran perform a balancing act during a show of the Emmett Kelly, Jr. Circus at the Birmingham Theatre. The pair appeared in several acts on trapeze, perch and balancing sticks. (Photos by Stephen Cantrell)

Foundation established to benefit WSU students

The Russell McLaughlin Foundation—provided for in the will of the late Russell J. McLaughlin, music and drama critic for the Detroit News for more than 25 years—has been established for the benefit of Wayne State University Theatre students.

Following the recent death of McLaughlin's wife, Grace McLaughlin Erskine, the Wayne State University Theatre became sole beneficiary of the McLaughlin estate. McLaughlin's will stipulated that the foundation be established to promote the study and development of drama and theater arts for the benefit of WSU students.

WSU Theatre Director Leonard Leone reports the theater staff has initiated plans to establish undergraduate scholarships similar to its Hilberry Theatre fellowships for graduate students.

Funds for the scholarships will be drawn from the McLaughlin Foundation income, to be forwarded to the university by the Detroit Trust Co., trustee for the estate. The plan calls for annual city and state-wide auditions for graduating high school seniors in order to select talented students for scholarships to pursue the study of theater arts.

formance by the Hilberry Graduate Repertory Company will be included in the day's program.

Russell J. McLaughlin died Oct. 12, 1975. In addition to writing music and drama criticism for the News, he wrote for WWJ radio; published several books including "Alfred Street," reminiscences of his childhood in Detroit; taught theater criticism and appreciation at Wayne State University and the University of Detroit; wrote several plays and many articles for periodicals and journals, and was active in local literary and theatrical organizations.

He received a master's degree from Wayne State in 1955 and was made an honorary Phi Beta Kappa at Wayne in 1966.

High school drama instructors interested in more information about the Russell McLaughlin Foundation scholarship program may write to: Prof. Robert Emmett McGill, Coordinator, High School Drama Conference, Wayne State University Theatre, Detroit, 48202.

Auto theme set for 1979 show

"Best of Everything" will be the theme for the 1979 Detroit Auto Show.

"The committee and I feel that 'Best of Everything' describes exactly what the public can expect to see at the 1979 Detroit Auto Show," said Leo Cahoun, 1979 Detroit Auto Show committee chairman.

"We will definitely have the best of new cars and trucks, with a complete line-up of domestic models and many imports," he said.

The 1979 Detroit Auto Show will be held at Cobo Hall, beginning Saturday, Jan. 13, and running through Sunday, Jan. 21. The show has been a Detroit attraction since 1908, when the Detroit Auto Dealers Association was founded for the express purpose of sponsoring the show.

IN ADDITION to the best in new cars and trucks, the 1979 show will feature a wide variety of special events, including entertainment by children's personalities Monday and Tuesday, in both the afternoon and evening.

"Wednesday will feature a Senior Citizens Party from 2-4 p.m., and a Celebrity Night from 7-10 p.m.," Cahoun said. "And of course, the ever-popular new car auctions will be held on Thursday and Friday evenings beginning at 8 p.m."

Show display managers have planned a variety of entertainment within their exhibits, from magic shows to dance routines.

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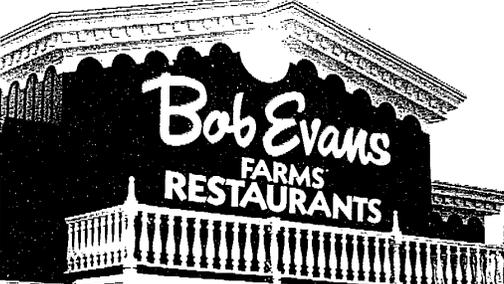
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FARMS RESTAURANTS

Schools set 'Mouse' play

How a small country could determine the fate of the entire world will be illustrated in the Brother Rice-Sacred Heart Players production of "The Mouse That Roared," Dec. 8 and 9 at 8 p.m. in the Academy of the Sacred Heart auditorium, 1250 Kensington Bloomfield Hills.

A commentary on Geo-politics, Leonard Wibberley's comedy-fantasy is directed by drama instructor Guy Morel with the assistance of Sacred Heart student Cathy Farrington.

Tickets priced at \$2 for adults and \$1.50 for students will be available at the door or by call 946-8800. Included in a cast of 49 are Sacred Heart students Mary Donaldson, Lisa Sehn, Lisa Yardley, Beth Koreman, Natal Loren Rosenberg, Joya Harris, Tiffany Kilar and Jeannine Palma. The Brother Rice Players include Chris Lynch, Dave Bodette, Andy Palms, Paul Rising, Larry Rising, Jim Riley, Shawn Riley, Dan New and Pete Darin.