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Characters enjoy a Renaissance



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Dana Gamarra, entertainment director of the Michigan Renaissance Festival, is dressed as Robin Hood, one of the characters featured at the annual outdoor event Saturdays-Sundays through Sept. 28.

By Louise Okrutsky
staff writer

THEY'RE WILLING to fill the shoes of kings or fools, queens or wenches. And for six consecutive weekends, they'll juggle, joust and jest their way through the history and tomfoolery of the Michigan Renaissance Festival.

About 110 performers will put in 10-hour days playing 16th-century festival characters, ranging from tradesmen to beggars. Many auditioned for their parts; others belonged to special interest groups. While a number of them come ready equipped with juggling and jousting skills, most of them were chosen because they appeared to be "loud, enthusiastic and crazy," said Dana Gamarra, the festival's entertainment director.

The seventh annual Michigan Renaissance festival is set for each weekend from Saturday, Aug. 16, to Sunday, Sept. 28, including Labor Day. This year's festival is at a new location on the north shore of Mount Holly ski resort on Dixie Highway (U.S. 10) between Pontiac and Flint. Until then, many of the preparations are handled through the festival's office in Birmingham.

"We want someone who's really energetic and wants to have fun. If this person wants to have fun, then the patron has fun," Gamarra said. There's hope for the equally determined but less effusive. "There are those who come to audition who are really quiet and shy. We put them in places like the Children's Dell, where they can work one on one with the youngsters."

IN THE DELL, children can color, play games and at the end of the day, participate in their own knighting ceremony. Adults who'd rather wander the 84-acre site discover that the style of entertainment falls somewhere between Greenfield Village and guerrilla

theater. Gamarra describes it as one of the larger examples of ensemble performing.

Patrons strolling through the streets are in danger of stumbling into the center of a skit. A special target are people who look as if they were dragged to the site by a parent, spouse or friend. Reluctant guests are put into the limelight, encouraged to participate. "We'll even entertain them out to their car in the parking lot," Gamarra said.

Working the exit gate, they'll sidle up to people leaving with a frown and, glancing at the group coming into the nearby entrance, plead, "Excuse me, my lord, can you smile so these people coming in believe you had the time of your life?"

Festival organizers admit that some patrons have the time of their lives if they're left alone. Actors learn to look into a visitor's eyes before involving the person in a skit. If a visitor dodges the actor's gaze, it's assumed that the person wants to be left alone.

In a crowd, the actor will touch someone on the shoulder before engaging that person. If the visitor pulls away, it's taken as a cue to look for another accomplice. "These (actors) who are good will go to the person right next to (the reluctant one)," Gamarra said.

FOR THE ACTOR, the challenge lies in keeping in character for the better part of a day. "It's amazing to watch the actors work and keep it fresh for nine hours," he said.

It has its rewards. "As a street character, when you see the reaction of a child, because it's one on one, it's a rush. To watch them just be amazed and in total awe. This isn't television. There's no proscenium separating you from the audience as there is in the theater. This is real live theater," Gamarra said. And a real live audience doesn't hesitate to talk back to the per-



Gambolling on the grass are Maggie Patton (left) as a wench, Chuck Greenfield as the town crier and Stephanie Greenfield as a fair maiden.

formers. "People come up to you and test you. They'd like to think they know more than you do. So you play the game. And in the process everyone learns a little more history," he said.

Each year, the festival hosts William Shakespeare for a weekend. "People will come up to him to see how much he really knows. They'll ask him questions and try to catch him," Gamarra grinned. "The man has a doctorate in literature. He's an expert." This year, the playwright visits Saturday-Sunday, Aug. 23-24.

Wild and crazy casting gives way to serious and regal when the festival's king and queen are chosen. "We chose them through auditions. We look at how they handle one-on-one improvisations. We look for a regalness and at how funny they can be. Mainly, we want to know what they're like when they're serious."

THIS YEAR reigning monarchs March and Janet McCarty of Davidsburg will renew their wedding vows during the festival's Renaissance Romance weekend, Saturday-Sunday, Sept. 6-7.

Youngsters who are first-time festival performers are enrolled in the academy, an open-air training program on the grounds where they learn the basics of hawking, juggling, stage combat and improvisation. "It helps. It's not turning people out there," Gamarra said.

Each group has 13 students. "I've been really surprised with some of the people who've come out of the academy." Whether watching a street character or a jester, Gamarra said, he enjoys seeing how their skills have grown.

And he's grown as part of his affiliation with the festival. Before he became involved with the event, he didn't have a serious interest in Renaissance history. "Personally, I was into kabuki."

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