

Mime's the Word

Mikael Rudolph Makes a Big Noise at Events—Without a Sound

BY SARAH SAWYER



If the thought of one more motivational speaker leaves the attendees at your event speechless with ennui, it might be time to book entertainment that's no talk and all action. Mime artist Mikael Rudolph plays upon the notion that variety performance, at its core, depends on the universally understood elements of skill, physical comedy, and illusion.

Rudolph isn't your average street mime. He doesn't wear a striped shirt or a beret. Rudolph performs in baggy pants, a vest, and bowler—wearing just enough stage makeup to render his features clearly visible all the way to the back row. He also doesn't perform any tired street mime vignettes involving shrinking boxes or AWOL balloons. Instead, he offers an hour-long vaudeville-style showcase featuring physical comedy, classic mime, hat juggling, magic, hand puppets, soft-shoe dance, and audience involvement. Each performance varies slightly according to environment and audience, but

spectators are always treated to Rudolph's signature piece, "Gravity Lecture," in which he spends the better part of three minutes wrestling an ornery stone into his suitcase. World-renowned mime Marcel Marceau, Rudolph's childhood inspiration, said of this piece, "In this style, he is a master. Absolutely. It could not have been done any better." Young audience members at the 2002 Minnesota State Fair's Children's Theater also were drawn in by the piece, screaming at Rudolph, "Come on! Let go of the rock!"

But how will Rudolph's G-rated lineup play to sophisticated corporate audiences? This low-tech, high-showmanship offering has been enjoyed by a surprisingly diverse collection of audiences. Even audiences who fancy themselves slapstick-resistant are fascinated. When Rudolph took the stage at The Walker Art Center, the center staff reported that shortly after his standing-room-only First Saturday performance, patrons re-entered the theater and "saved" seats

in case a second performance was added. And radio personality Joe Soucheray, who greeted the idea of interviewing a mime at the 2002 Minnesota State Fair with a big, honking, foghorn sound of dread, found himself describing Rudolph's performance as "a definite highlight of our State Fair shows."

Rudolph, who has been performing for two decades, developed his craft during years of study with professionals all over the world, including Marcel Marceau, Gregg Goldston, and C. Nicholas Johnson at the Goldston/Johnson School for Mimes in Gambier, Ohio; Marc Bauman of the Marcel Marceau mime school in Paris; the Seattle Mime Theater; Pepper Kaminoff of the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus, and the Margolis-Brown physical theater company in Minneapolis. Besides performing two years in a row at both the Minnesota State Fair and Paramount Parks/Great America in Santa Clara, Calif., Rudolph also has appeared at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival for 12 consecutive

seasons. Although it's perhaps gently ironic for a mime, Rudolph says his best marketing tool has been "word of mouth. If you focus on the quality of your work, then your clients will be your best agents."

Rudolph is developing new work specifically for corporate audiences in which he combines many elements of his original show into a depiction of a corporate climate. Rudolph explains, "I'm interested in exploring the character of a 'guy at work' at the moment everything goes awry. He experiences a physical loss of control, challenges in his environment and so on." Rudolph expects this show to be available for the 2003 season, and anticipates the performance fees will range from \$750 for his standard one-man show to \$1,500 for a fully staged production that includes theater lighting, set pieces, a second performer, and sound.

"Being able to laugh at oneself by being able to laugh at a physical comedian's foibles is cathartic," Rudolph says. "An audience watches someone on stage who's without bounds, willing to do just about anything physically to make other people enjoy their lives a little more at that time. I especially like working with a group of adults who know each other from working together day after day. I hope I give them something to talk about and laugh about together, both during the show and for the succeeding weeks."

Sarah Sawyer is a performer and culture writer living in Minneapolis.

PLANNING NOTES

Mikael Rudolph is a Minneapolis-based performer and the administrative director of Entertaining Company, a co-operative of entertainers that provides quality family entertainment at affordable prices. The co-op can provide performers who specialize in magic, European clown theater, Middle Eastern music and dance, juggling, and madrigal singing; members include a harpist, a brass ensemble, a stage combat troupe, and a mime. For more information, visit www.entertainingco.com or call 612-722-7333.

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