

HISTORY IN THE MAKING



Staff Photo / John Croft

Michael Winship of Texas (on dark horse) as the evil Sir Michael Stafford battled Sir Geoffrey of Harwicke (Jeff Bartco of Colorado) in 1988.

Hundreds clamor to perform at ye olde Renaissance Festival



Staff Photo / John Croft
Sir Geoffrey lightened a strap on his armor to prepare for his match.

Renaissance Festival

Where: 4 miles south of Shakopee on Hwy. 169

When: 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., week-ends through Sept. 25

Tickets: \$12.95 for adults, \$9.95 for seniors 62 and older, \$4.95 for children 5 to 12. Children under 5 get in free. 445-7361

What's happening: A family fair with flavor of the 1500s, including jugglers, magicians, mimics, comedians, musicians on eight stages; arts and crafts; foods; jousting.

Where to find news: Updates and event schedules will appear throughout the festival in Friday's Variety/Weekend sections and Sunday's Entertainment sections.

By Tim Harlow / Staff Writer

Back when the 24-year-old Renaissance Festival was in its infancy, its organizers had to search high and low for jugglers, mimics, strolling characters—even a king. That's how they found George Herman, who in the mid-1970s was working in an art studio and acting part-time at various local theaters. This year's festival, which opens Saturday and runs weekends and Labor Day through Sept. 25, will mark Herman's 19th year in the role of King Henry.

Times have changed since Herman was first crowned king of the annual outdoor fair, which features continuous entertainment: jousting knights on horseback, spontaneous sword fights, musical acts, comedians and craftspeople who demonstrate their trade. Samplings of the Renaissance-type fare, such as turkey drumsticks, Scotch eggs, apple dumpings and wine, are available across the festival grounds, located four miles south of Shakopee on Hwy. 169.

Though it now takes more than some 750 entertainers and craftspeople to give visitors a taste of 16th-century Europe (the first festival in 1970 only needed 50), there is much more competition for those roles, said marketing coordinator Dina Volt. "Now we've got people knocking on our doors," she said.

Prospective performers start by filling out an application (accepted from October through mid-May), then audition before a panel of veteran festival performers. Auditions include two personal interviews and a short performance, which is videotaped. Promising candidates are invited to attend the Renaissance Festival Academy, a training program where would-be performers work on character development, language, history, costume and improvisation.



Staff Photo / Bruce Bisping
Michael Anderson and Darin O'Brien re-created the battle of Robin Hood and Little John in 1992.

"Academy is a lot of fun, but you definitely work hard," said Lynn Winter, 24, who will make her festival debut this year. She'll play a character named Nutzo who, among other things, puts on rabbit ears and acts like a bunny. "You're there from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m., twice a week for six weeks. You play games, sing songs, learn how to talk and walk. You get tips on costuming and how to deal with crowds and [how to] end a bit if it's not going well. They really

Renaissance

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stress and encourage you to keep trying things, even if your idea is dumber than rocks. It's like going to acting school."

In deciding who will graduate from the academy and perform at the festival, artistic director Gary Parker said he looks for not only acting ability, but also commitment, since the volunteer actors are required to be at the festival every day during its run. Of the 124 people who auditioned this year, 52 were invited to the academy; 42, including Winter, "graduated." (Artists who want to display their wares go through a similar selection process, including an audition because they have direct contact with festivalgoers.)


Herman and other major acts, such as the popular comic duos of Puke and Snot, Rat Catcher and Pastorius the Idiot, are paid on a contract basis. Parker declined to divulge the range in salary for the festival's paid performers. Most of the jugglers, magicians, mimes, musicians and costumed characters are *not* paid, however — and even after they pass auditions, they remain subject to scrutiny by festival offi-

cial "to make sure the character stays true," Voit said.

The biggest challenges of these "street theater"-types include staying in character and developing a historical persona while interacting with 20th-century fairgoers, according to Herman, who visits the academy each year to give aspiring actors advice. "If you believe you are who you claim the character is, then the audience will believe it, too," said Herman, who also works at the annual Arizona Renaissance Festival and will participate in a new North Carolina Renaissance fair in October. "You have to be well-researched and well-prepared, because you never know what your audience will say — and it helps to be adept at steering the conversation to your strength."

Herman says there are two keys to being successful: discipline and humility. "You can do this for self-gratification, but you have to remember the main reason you're out there and that is to entertain the people," he said.

For more information call 445-7361

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