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ool's Paradise

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In ye olde
Shakopee Valley,
medieval lurks
in the hearts of men



FOOL'S PARADISE

Journey through the new Dark Ages of Shakopee Valley
with the cowed, the corseted, and the coxcombed

by Peter Ritter

photos by Michael Dvorak

The prologue



At noon, the sun finally pokes through a sluggish haze that has hung over the village all morning. It filters down through the leaded windows of the quaint, half-timber shops and glitters on the steel tips of the pennants held aloft by the men-at-arms lined up like chess pieces across the green. The little hamlet is quite pretty in the sunlight, all aged wood and candy-cane detailing. There's a distinct smell in the air, too: wood smoke, roasting meat of one kind or another, and fresh-cut grass. A rooster named Chanticleer, confused by the sudden infusion of light, starts crowing. A sheep, confused by the rooster's crowing, begins bleating. An elephant, who doesn't care for all the noise, puffs indignantly and deposits what looks like a pile of bowling balls in the grass.

It's the 16th Century, give or take four hundred years. Good King Henry VIII has taken Anne Boleyn as his second wife but has not yet had time to behead her. In Florence the Renaissance is producing a new aesthetic order and many, many pictures of naked people. In Germany the advent of the printing press is spreading literacy to the unlearned masses. In Switzerland, the invention of the clock is making everyone late. It's a time of unmatched plenty, and the automated teller machines of the village are well stocked with currency. The marketplace, too, is saturated with paintings of dragons, inexpensive jewelry, drinking horns, and hand-blown glass goblets.

A few minutes after noon, the King arrives, trailing lavishly costumed courtiers through the mud. He, too, is dressed in haute Renaissance fashion, with a long green doublet hanging over his belly, and a crown propped on his head. The King smiles serenely—great teeth!—and offers a meaty hand to the gathered onlookers, who part to facilitate his

progress. From the other side of the green, the procession looks like a flock of exotic, flightless birds. "Look," cries someone in the crowd. "He's going to do something."

He doesn't do anything. The King smiles and continues on his merry way, followed by a long column of pale men in puffy shirts, large, silly hats, and tights splattered in mud, and pale women in billowing dresses and underskirts, also splattered in mud. The royal convoy passes a man in ash-colored rags who is rooting through a garbage can for the amusement of the crowd. "Who's that?" someone whispers. "That's the Rat Catcher," someone else responds, obviously pleased to have recognized a Rat Catcher on the first try. "Are there rats here?" Nearby, William Shakespeare, red-faced and a little unsteady on his feet, totters toward the privy.

The peasants seem to be slopping in a counterclockwise direction and, it being fairly crowded, the traffic ushers one down a narrow lane lined with small shops selling cappuccino and bracelets, past a woman trying to guide a stroller through a muddy ditch without tipping its contents into the water, and around a corner, to where a small crowd has gathered to listen to a pub wench calling herself Mistress Bawd sing risqué madrigals. After two songs, a woman in the audience says, "This is hardly family entertainment" and stalks off, dragging behind her two pretty little blond girls with pink fairy wings strapped to their backs.

In 1940 the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin surveyed just such a scene depicted by François Rabelais. "Abuses, cursés, profanities, and improprieties are the unofficial elements of speech," he concluded. "Such speech forms, liberated from norms, hierarchies, and prohibitions of established idiom, become themselves a peculiar argot and create a special collective, a group of people initiated in familiar intercourse, who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally. The marketplace was such a collective, especially the festive, carnivalesque crowd at the fair."



Henry VIII, portrait of a serial killer: George Hermann and Leslie O'Bryan play the Renaissance Festival's royal couple

The carnival, Bakhtin argued, represented an outlet for primeval urges—that is, eating, drinking, and the making of merriness. The release of this energy, he continued, was also an act of dissension from established social mores. The participants, freed from the strictures of decorum, were thus freed to reinvent themselves at will.

So what is this Renaissance Festival exactly? Maybe it is a lovingly manufactured kind of merry—the 16th Century, sponsored by Pepsi and Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. Or a kitschy summer camp for European history buffs. Or perhaps it's a fully interactive period drama with a 22-acre stage, no script, and no distinction between actor and audience.

The Renaissance fair, in any case, a legitimate cultural phenomenon: a traffic jam of theater, art, commerce, and history as vulgar, loud, and puzzling as anything the 16th Century produced. It is also a thoroughly modern industry. There are now perhaps 70 major Renaissance festivals around the United States, one near almost every metropolitan area between New York City and Houston. Though the popular perception of such events remains that of a lumpen bacchanal during which *Star Trek* aficionados squeeze into costumes far too tight for their winter-white bodies, gorge on turkey legs, buy unicorn-shaped merchandise, and get falling-down drunk, the medieval pageants nevertheless draw throngs on the same scale as established amusement parks. The Minnesota Renaissance Festival, one of the largest in the nation, is expected to attract at least 320,000 patrons this year. If each buys an admission ticket and only one turkey leg, the fest will earn about six million dollars over a seven-week run. (The Festival's operators decline to reveal just how many ducats end up in the coffers each year.)

What puts the coscomb and tight on the Renaissance Festival, however, is the enthusiasts and participants who call themselves Rennies or Ren Rats, and constitute a minor but thriving subculture, with a network of zines, Web sites, and fraternities. Rennies are, as might be expected, mostly amateur historians. As a loose confederation, they have also

adopted the habits of a secret society, from coded greetings to fictional personas and designations (wench, rogue, and so forth). So, too, the festivals have spawned their own parlance and, of course, uniforms. Specially fitted boots are, for some reason, a particularly fetishized item and can cost up to \$800. "You can tell you're a true Rennie," one participant remarks, "if your clothes cost more than your car."

In the Rennie vernacular, "anachronism" has come to mean anything that strikes discord with the fictional milieu of the fest, from an improperly laced bodice to a polyester kilt. The rather strict rules governing garb and etiquette are all designed to sustain the illusion of a 16th-century hamlet. Yet the festivals themselves present a particularly ordered and pleasant version of Elizabethan history—these are no interactive educational displays, in other words. The fairs are predicated, rather, on the notion that the pre-technological world was at one time a very pleasant place, full of smiling, chubby women and men in tights.

In fact, writes William Manchester in his excellent Renaissance history, *A World Lit Only by Fire*, "After the extant fragments have been fitted together, the portrait which emerges is a melange of incessant warfare, corruption, lawlessness, obsession with strange myths, and an almost impenetrable mindlessness."

If it is not, then, historical verisimilitude that brings innocents to the Renaissance, perhaps it is the role-playing itself—the opportunity to slip one's skin entirely, don a costume, and drive the minivan into the late Middle Ages. In this land of make-believe, among the stunted houses with tinted windows and period detailing, every character has a place in a carefully plotted social hierarchy. There is, however, little differentiation between play as theater and play as play. Visitors and villagers alike gorge, gawk, and live out elaborate social fantasies. It's the role-playing game that once filled all-night sessions with your grade school friends, now grown up and marketed as an adult theme park. ➤

PARADISE from page 13

THE RAT CATCHER'S TALE

From time to time, Carr Hagerman worries that there is something silly and not altogether dignified about the way he makes his living. In such moments of doubt, he takes some comfort in the fact that he is the most established of all Renaissance Festival street performers. He is quick to note, also, that the character he invented 28 years ago, the Rat Catcher, is now as much a part of the Minnesota festival's human topography as the portly king and the armored joustiers. "I'm more of a classic fool than a real rat catcher," he says. "My act is really about insulting people and running a constant commentary on what everyone is doing. I'm sort of the antifestival. I'm given permission to mock everything in the name of good fun. I also play with garbage."

"Gee," he adds with a self-deprecating giggle. "It sounds funny when I say it, like I'm not right in the head."

There is Method acting in his madness, though. Hagerman, it turns out, hails from a fairly traditional theater background: His mother was an actor at the Old Log Theater, he explains, and he grew up surrounded by thespians and colorful costumes. In 1974, at age 14, he found himself onstage at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival performing with a high school group. As he describes it, the feeling of humming it up in front of a costumed crowd was like a drug-induced high. He was quickly addicted and promptly decided never to leave.

After getting offstage, he and a drama teacher went to a nearby restaurant and Hagerman sketched out an alter ego on a napkin. The charge he came up with was a sinister clown based loosely on a member of the unshockable caste that dealt with vermin in the Dark Ages (such a fellow might have been a particular parish during outbreaks of the Black Death,

A wrinkle in time: Elephant and trainer transport passengers into an imagined past

Hagerman is, as he claims, a classic fool, almost Chaplinesque in his stage demeanor. He dresses for the festival in soiled rags and stumbles through the crowd like a Dickensian ghoul, face smeared with ash, and teeth made up into a British orthodontist's nightmare. He likes children, he explains, because they are small and easy targets. He will also pick out a dyed-and-pierced teenager and dub her "the tackle box" for the amusement of onlookers. He picks through

"I'M MORE OF A CLASSIC FOOL THAN A REAL RAT CATCHER. I'M GIVEN PERMISSION TO MOCK EVERYTHING IN THE NAME OF GOOD FUN. I ALSO PLAY WITH GARBAGE."

but in truth, medieval epidemiology did not recognize the carriers of bubonic plague until late in the 16th Century, and the real culprit, a small black rat that lived aboard ships, was so familiar that it managed to avoid scrutiny for centuries). Although Hagerman doesn't try very hard to be "period," he considers that his alter ego's status as an outcast gives him license to act the part of the trickster.

It was not necessarily the period atmosphere that hooked him in the first place, Hagerman continues, but the thrill of improvising before the rambunctious crowd. "There's a danger to it that's very enticing," he explains. "I can stop just about anywhere and a crowd will gather around me. I often don't know what's going to come out of my mouth."

More often than not, what comes out is mockery of unsuspecting festival visitors. He will call the King "chairman of the board" or accuse a stoic farmer in a John Deere hat for a compromising photo opportunity. He considers his mischief a necessary counterbalance to the festival's pomp.

the detritus left in the wake of hungry masses, and will often use a half-gnawed turkey leg as a prop in one of his tramp routines.

Although the Rat Catcher is now a festival tradition (a pair of snowbirds from New Brighton actually seek him out, hoping to be insulted), Hagerman's first years on the circuit were arduous. "In the old days, I was living in a sleeping bag, out in the woods with no tent. The next year I graduated to a tent, then the back of a booth. Eventually the job afforded me the luxury of a really nice trailer and I lived in that—a trailer on the festival circuit being the mark of success."

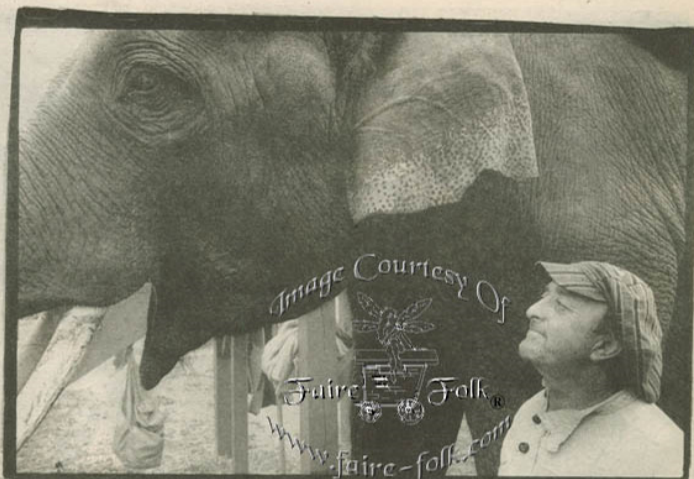
"It was the first job in theater I ever had," he explains. "So it was tough at first. I toured with Duke and Snoot and Penn and Teller. We'd be on the circuit from March to October. You know, it's remarkable how people would come back every year for the conditions and the pay—neither of which are great."

He continues: "It's changed now. In the old days, it was like being at summer camp. You'd work really hard for two days of

week, play music in the evenings, maybe go see a movie off-site. I'm in my 40s now, so it's different for me. There's just no stability in it. There's nowhere to go."

Hagerman eventually settled in a little house in Chaska, about two miles from the festival grounds. He also managed to parlay his theater background into work doing seminars on improvisation for local corporations. "I lived in denial about what I did for so long," he explains. "Like with my wife, it wasn't until we'd gone out for a while that I confessed what I'd done with my life. I figured she'd avoid me like the plague. But then she quit her corporate job to go out on the circuit."

These days, Hagerman has converted the whole family to Renaissance: His wife sells handmade moccasins, and his mother is the on-site wedding coordinator. "I guess if someone will pay you to do something you like," he muses, "it's better than working for Sears or whatever your whole life, right?"



"I lived in denial about what I did for so long": Carr Hagerman acts out as the Rat Catcher

THE KING'S TALE

Just as Hagerman discovered an affection for refuse and crowds, a flock of new creative anachronists find themselves drawn to the a full-fledged Renaissance man or woman at the Minnesota festival, however, new entertainers must pass—or at least attend—a rigorous five-week training program known as Renaissance Academy. Some of the aspiring wenches and prospective knaves will eventually be stationed around the festival grounds as a sort of flesh-and-blood backdrop. Others will join the roving bands of costumed and coarse caricatures that interact with festival crowds. Four nights a week during July and early August, the motley crew of

PARADISE from page 14

high school kids, part-time actors, and what we shall call role-playing enthusiasts gather to get their *thurs* and *thous* in order.

The first week, explains Gary Parker, who started the academy 20 years ago, is an introduction to the basics of improvisational theater. The rookies, as he calls them, are allowed to develop their own festival personas and work out how they might fit into the village's established social order. "We don't even mention the Renaissance at the beginning. They're responsible for coming up with ideas about what they want to be, but we talk about character and language and how to join a street scene."

By the second week, the rookies, having established their characters, begin an immersion course in Renaissance history. They meet in the evenings on the close-cropped village green or in a nearby hotel conference room to sit through lessons on how to address a social superior or how to approach the King. "The basis of character," Parker tells them, "is to be yourself at the festival...Some of you have been trying way too hard."

After some practice dialogue ("Hast thou seen the joust?" "Verily, a most fantastic sight") the novices are led through the festival grounds, presumably so they won't get lost. One of the rookies, a chain-smoking 15-year-old aspiring philosopher, explains the appeal of the fete: "Most of us are really into the Renaissance. You have to love it to add it a peasant."

For their trouble, the apprentice performers are paid nothing. The first year, Parker explains, is an apprenticeship, and although the novice performers work gratis, they also work on amore. "The villagers don't do this for the money. They may get a little to cover expenses, but they also make their own costumes."

For Parker's pupils, the apogee of their training is an audience with the King, who holds forth on a gothic gazebo surrounded by nobles, courtiers, and other people in rights. The King sits on the opposite end of the feudal food chain, and is for the lowly apprentice

mean I'm on some kind of ego trip—I'm actually a very democratic person [pause for effect]. But sometimes you will run into me when I'm King Henry and say, 'Whos, what happened?' Because when it's King Henry, it's not George."

"THEY WERE HOLDING AUDITIONS FOR A KING, AND THEY HADN'T FOUND ANYONE THEY LIKED. IT WAS STRANGE HOW IT HAPPENED. I JUST DISCOVERED THIS IS WHAT I DO. I'M A PROFESSIONAL KING."

the apothosis of Renaissance Festival success. "It's just astounding how his presence can intimidate new villagers," whispers Parker as a supplicant, an apprentice beard bather with an as-yet-unidentifiable brogue approaches the royal dais. "He's just so good at creating a character and living in it all day."

The King, whose name is George Herman, seems to hold himself in the same esteem. He is a stone on the heavy side, and has an immaculately trimmed beard. Countless hours in the summer sun have rendered his face the texture of soft leather, and his crown fits snugly over a smooth mound of black hair. In apparel, physique, and bearing, he looks the part. And, indeed, in contrast to the rabble of villagers—poyntails and Korn T-shirts are the norm for apprentices—he is every bit the king.

Once the villagers have fallen into place before the throne, the King begins his salutary address. "Keep in mind," he booms, "when it's not George, it's King Henry. It doesn't

The King is what's called, in the parlance of professional sport, the franchise player. He has acted the royal part since 1977, and true to his historical form, has seen many rounds of queens come and go. His current first lady, Leslie O'Bryan, rose through the ranks of carnival game barkers and has worked the festival for 11 years. During the fest, the king, queen, and court migrate around the grounds, a sort of movable feast, presiding periodically over a joust or Dionysian banquet.

The King works two days a week, and spends the rest of his time writing staged material for the royal court. Though he works the national circuit full-time as the King, he has also served as entertainment director for the Colorado Renaissance Festival and manages a comfortable living. Like that of most circuit performers, his rise to prominence was serendipitous; yet he has also come to consider his position as predestined. "I was a painter," he explains in a non-King Henry moment. "But there's no surer way to go broke

in this country than becoming an artist. I was actually trying to avoid acting to concentrate on art."

The royal audience begins to break up and the apprentices wander off for a smoke break. A pair of sheep run across the village green, closely pursued by an infant in a sagging diaper. "They were holding auditions for a king, and they hadn't found anyone they liked, so this director recommended me and, of course, I turned them down at first. It was strange how it happened. I just discovered this is what I do. I'm a professional king."

"I'm unusual." The King chuckles and waves a mosquito away from his face with a prodigiously ringed hand. "I was given this gift by nature. I'm the King."

The MERCHANT'S TALE



is a potential matrimonial venue, a Renaissance Festival may rank just above a 24-hour Vegas casino chapel invested with the sacrosanct authority of the State Gaming Commission. Over the run of an average festival, two dozen couples will nevertheless choose to consecrate their love beneath a hand-built medieval gazebo, in the sight of the jousting corral and, presumably, God. And for true shogun affairs, Neal Nye's quaint, low-ceilinged booth waits just a stone's throw away with cases full of diamond-encrusted wedding bands. Among the 270 craftspeople who set up shoppe at the festival, Nye is an institution. He has exhibited his wares here since the first fest in September of 1971, and he has seen it evolve from what was originally billed as a "Celebration of Nature, Art, and Life" to a major commercial configura-

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tion. "I started coming in 1971," he says. "The festival was in a very pretty little field then, with a little hill and little oak trees. Everyone dressed in funny clothes and had a good time. Even then, it was very successful. I've watched this thing grow from a happy hippie party to a professional, businesslike entertainment event."

The Rennie phenomenon officially began in 1963 in Hollywood with a schoolteacher named Phyllis Patterson, who, together with her then husband, organized a small crafts fair to demonstrate the 16th-century marketplace to her students. It was so successful that in the proceeding year, Patterson built a larger festival, named it the Pleasure Faire, and recruited jugglers and actors from San Francisco's burgeoning street-theater scene. Not surprising, given the year and place, those early festivals had a distinctly countercultural feel, officially celebrating Elizabethan artistry but drifting toward the Age of Aquarius.

"It sort of came out of the golden age of the hippie movement," explains Jules Smith Jr., an impresario on the national festival scene and son of one of the late founders of the Minnesota Renaissance Festival. "The first fairs coincided with a revival of an interest in arts and crafts. It was a very mellow, feel-good event."

The late Sixties were a heyday for medieval history and fantasy versions thereof—what with the popularity of Hobbits, and British folk stars like Sandy Denny singing traditional songs about magical mist and dragons. From the accounts of tour veterans, those first Renaissance fairs sound a bit like a 16th-century Woodstock—an imagined, preindustrial utopia when people happily made their living from the land.

In Minnesota a consortium of artisans first scouted out a location for their own festival in 1971. In its first year, the fairs was nothing more than a flea market of tinkers and artists—the hopelessly romantic and the hopeless—who camped on the shore of Lake Grace in Jonathan, Minnesota, to celebrate nature and craft and



Diamonds are a wench's best friend: Jeweler and unofficial festival historian Neal Nye trades old stones for modern currency

make a few dollars selling their stuff. Then 25,000 people showed up, and when a Minneapolis land-use lawyer and European history buff named Jules Smith invested \$6,000 in the event, it took off.

"That first year," recalls Jules Smith Jr., "it was just sawhorses with boards across them. Everyone worked by passing the hat. There were nice costumes, but that was the kindest thing you could say about it. They had some really aggressive promoters, though, and it got really big. The real explosion happened in Minnesota, and bunches of people went off in other directions and started other festivals."

Smith Sr. would go on to become a festival

impresario, building an ersatz 16th-century village in his back yard and shipping it out to the East Coast in pieces. The Minnesota festival, too, became a major confluence of commerce and kitsch, and by 1976 management was taken over by Mid-America Festivals, a Shakopee-based company that also owns fairs in Florida, Kansas City, and Michigan.

By then, the arts-and-crafts ethos of the happy hippie party had mostly given way to marketed escapism, and some artisans were franchising booths at festivals across the nation to sell their trinkets. There was even concern in the early Nineties that Boulder, Colorado-based Renaissance Entertainment Corp. was trying to

buy up independent fairs and turn the Renaissance festival industry itself into a franchise operation, with amenities like executive sky boxes for jousting matches. In other words, today's 16th Century bears only a passing resemblance to the age depicted by the first Renaissance Festival participants.

The discovery that people were willing to shell out \$200 for hand-blown glass goblets and handmade jewelry has proven a major boon for artisans. "I work toward this all year long," says Nye. "It's so big, I suppose I must see an average of 20,000 people a day for 15 days. It's not something I can just whip together on a weekend. I have to build inventory all year long to prepare for it."

"I'm here for a long time every day," Nye finishes, slightly wistfully. "Sometimes you can smell the food cooking and the smoke from little fires. In the evenings, the candles come flickering on all over the place and you can still imagine that you're in a little medieval village."

The Wench's Tale



For a nominal fee, you can become an official Wench, which according to the Wenches Guild is actually an acronym for Women Entitled to Nothing but Complete Happiness. "The Guild," the group's Web site (www.wench.org) explains, "is a loose (not necessarily literally) yet powerful confederation of women who share beliefs that some may consider sexist but we feel are just fine. Among those beliefs are the idea that it is every woman's right to choose what she does with her body, with whom she does it and where and when...We are not content to sit idly by and watch as ourselves and our sisters →

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PARADISE from page 17

are being stifled, ignored, abused, abandoned, raped, murdered, stereotyped or mistreated in any other way, whether physically, mentally, emotionally or socially." And then: "You too can become a Wench."

The laissez-faire sexual attitude is pervasive among visiting wenches (who are pervasive among festivalgoers). Demographic studies quoted in an industry journal show that women ages 25-45 are the most frequent visitors. The mix of bawdy banter and Wench Power presents an unusual duality, but it is also one that has its roots in the Renaissance. In her *A History of the Breast*, Marilyn Yalom of the Stanford University Institute for Women and Gender, argues that the sexualization of the female mammary gland was actually a manifestation of the shift from medieval to neo-Platonic aesthetic models. "Whether in Rome at the seat of the Papacy," she writes, "or in the notoriously venal city of Venice, or at any number of regional Italian courts, breasts were celebrated as a part of the new sexual freedom that marked the Renaissance."

But to cut through yé olde crap, the décolletage of festival fashion is marked both in its omnipresence and in the infinite variety of shapes into which bodies are pushed, pulled, and manipulated. "French a Wench" was once a popular festival contest, and fairgoers occasionally still give each other "wubbies," which involves burying a man's face in a wench's cleavage.

Susan Agrawal, whose character, Mistress Bawd, is perhaps the embodiment of this care-free lustiness, has come to appreciate the banter, and actually prefers it to the more overt sexual chatter of the real world. "Some of Shakespeare's plays are pretty raunchy," she says. "I like it more as opposed to nowadays. It's all innuendo. You have to use your noggin. Like when I say, 'Good sir, would you like to travel into the



All bawdy madrigals, all the time: Mistress Bawd (Susan Agrawal) plays it loose and lusty

mountains," it adds a lot more mystery and romance than just talking about... She trails off.

Unlike most carnivals or theme parks, where sex is often sublimated, the fests thrive on double-entendre, suggestion, and imagination; here wallflowers become wenches, and computer programmers become swashbuckling rogues. If you think of the whole business as a erotic role-playing, Mistress Bawd might fill the part

of the Wife of Bath. "I didn't want to be just any old wench," she explains. "I wanted to sing rowdy beer-swinging songs like the guys. A woman just didn't do those things. I thought of Joan of Arc, but she's too serious. Then I thought of a pub wench."

Mistress Bawd has her own theme song, a raved-up Scottish tune that includes crowing roosters and cocky catcalls. It is called, appropri-

ately, "Renaissance Theme," and appears on her album, *A Touch of Renaissance*. Bawd has, incredibly, built a successful musical career playing the festival circuit. "I've been singing since I was a youngster and I always loved ballads," says Agrawal. My mother's parents came over from England, so I grew up on a lot of those old songs. I went over to England in '79 and fell in love with it, so I went out and auditioned for a Renaissance festival."

"I've always leaned toward the poetic history," she explains. "In that time, they were able to sell wares they made with their own hands. I love to buy things that aren't factory-made. It just has more love in it."

Agrawal grew up on a horse farm in Eden Prairie when the suburb was pastoral countryside. She was, she says, entranced by the fantasy world of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and imagined herself as the demure heroine. If a career as a professional wench seems a far cry from such daydreams, she is also quick to point out that her wenchdom is just an act. "I come from a Christian background," she says.

Paradise to page 20

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PARADISE from page 18

"I'm the most reserved wench you'll ever meet. People think Mistress Bawd and Susan are one. They're not. Susan is sort of shy. She's definitely an older egg."

Agrawal was discovered while working in child care, when an inspector with a friend of a friend in the music business came to examine her house. Before that, she'd been what she describes as a "Jackie of all trades." In the early Eighties, she was working for Hennepin County Detox and thinking about a career in chemical-dependency counseling. Later she took a job as an MT bus driver, getting stuck, as most neophyte drivers do, on the inner-city lines. "I thought I'd listen to my parents for once and get a real job. That was right at the high point of the gang wars in Minneapolis and I was stuck on the routes that the veterans wouldn't take. It gave me a lot of experience dealing with the public and knowledge about things you don't read in the newspaper. But you see too much, in my opinion. It was starting to break my heart. I guess I'm a happy person and I want to stay happy."

On the upshot, the experience did teach Agrawal a thing or two about dealing with the crowd and disorderly, who are a fixture of the festival circuit. There are occasional scary moments—an obsessed fan or a man who gets sloshed and goes berserk during a banquet—but for the most part, she's learned to take it all in stride. When a tipsy fairgoer jumps onstage to try to kiss her on the cheek, she artfully defuses the situation with a quip. She considers men to be "big children" when they're drunk and treats them as such.

Yet this is not always easy. In Houston a few years ago, she was deflecting the amorous overtures of a group of men by telling them to meet her at the gate after the festival closed for the evening. It was fine until one night when she stepped out at closing time and ran into a group of seven drunken cowboys. She ran, of course,

THE KNIGHT'S TALE

Consider the logistics of armed combat. To begin, the jouster must lock his elbow down at a 90-degree angle in order to wedge the lance between the crook of his arm and the breastplate of his armor and keep the force of impact from snapping his wrist. He must check the strap of his armor to see that they are secure. The sheet of metal over his chest and neck will transfer energy from the blow to his midsection so that his neck does not break.

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The blow, 32,000 pounds per square foot delivered on the end of a wooden spear, may gouge an arm, break fingers, or snap a shoulder out of its socket. He knows, also, that he'll shiner more to 30 degrees in either direction, the weight of the armor will pull him out of the saddle. The imminent danger is falling and getting caught in the stirrups. He has seen men dragged 150 feet beneath the hooves of a stampeding horse. Once, while performing in a bank parking lot, he watched another rider get knocked down and skid across the pavement in a fountain of sparks, like a bent muffler scraping along the highway.

There are perhaps 100 professional joustiers active in the United States. Some are lawyers or office managers on hiatus from life, but most

are like Bryan Hughes, who has been jousting on the circuit full time for six years with the Sarasota, Florida-based troupe, Warhorse Productions. Here are the particulars: He is rock-star handsome, with collar-length hair tinted from days in the sun. He has a slight South Florida drawl and smokes continuously. He is a self-confessed adrenaline junkie, and spends his free time working out or skydiving or doing anything else that releases endorphins. He compares jousting to an extreme sport.

In the 16th Century, it was as popular as football or soccer in Europe. The tournaments were held like the Super Bowl. It hurts like hockey or football hurts. You usually end up getting blown

out once a weekend and you never know when it's going to happen. You just try and relax, like you're supposed to do in a car wreck."

Hughes also considers jousting a lost art. Contrary to popular belief, he explains, tournaments were held well into the 16th Century, even during the slow decline of the landed gentry. Jousting was a way for these men to keep their equestrian skills polished, and thus was not unlike a recreational sport. Although many of his fellows also compete in professional wrestling, Hughes can become quite indignant when spectators suggest that it is only "real" in the same sense as wrestling. Festivals do occasionally contract for "blowouts," he explains, but most of the time, the jousting is full-contact.

The joustiers live in an encampment near the festival grounds, separate from the weekenders, whom they speak of with some disdain. They are on the road all year, often all, performing at 30 festivals. For stretches of a month or two, they reside in a transitory camp that is a jumble of tents and small campers, which are themselves a jumble of costumes, medieval weaponry, and discarded food containers. On a given night, the camp is populated by a throng of assorted girlfriends, children, and dogs. The joustiers call themselves "New Riders of the Golden Age," and seem to have developed a peculiar cult of the alpha male.

Hughes also has a squire, who is actually his younger brother on a postgraduate drift around the country. While he's charting the squire shows up with dinner, which is Marlboro Light cigarettes and Taco Bell (they call it "survival food"). Assorted beads and bras navigate a maze of trailers. It suddenly seems both medieval and not such a day: absolute no responsibilities except to tend horses and get battered by a sword three times a day; always moving from town to town; living in a world that might have existed 400 years ago, but probably didn't. "It's not for everybody," he says, "but it's not a bad life."

Another jouster, a former samurai from C-P, Spain taking a break from the world, pipes in: "Someone once told me you have to make sacrifices to pursue your passion." Then he adds: "Plus, I'm two inches too short and 100 pounds too light to be a pro joustier." "I'm a firm believer in the five-day weekend," says a former professional wrestler with the unlikely but true name Doug E. Bible, who works the circuit playing a village idiot. "I consider myself a professional smart-ass, like most people here. Live in the front seat of a truck half the time, and I've seen a lot of weird shit." And then, as though to demonstrate, he drops his pants and stands there grinning calmly in the rain. The Dark Ages are over. Long live the Dark Ages.



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