

variety

STARTRIBUNE.COM/LIFESTYLE • SECTION E • THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2011

The Renaissance Festival is about the people as well as the period.



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Twig the Fairy (a.k.a. Kathy Gfeller) blew a magical kiss to a young fan at the Renaissance Festival in Shakopee.

Taking root in kids' hearts

Twig the Fairy is just a few feet out of her lair when a tiny girl sprints up and hugs the green-clad pixie with all her might. Within seconds a half-dozen small fry have surrounded Twig, their parents snapping photos.

"There is this moment when a kid is so enthralled, they look at you with a sense of real belief," says Twig's alter ego, Kathy Gfeller, 29, of Minneapolis. "It's one of the most wonderful things ever. You can't have a bad day when kids are running up to you and hugging you."

Twig keeps them believing by dispensing boundless charm, plus more than a pound of fairy dust at the Ren Fest and 5,000 pounds of fairy stones at events throughout the year. Her winsome persona has helped Twig garner more than 220,000 Facebook fans.

She does it all without uttering a word. Except for one time.

"There was a little girl who was so enamored with Twig, and her family came out every weekend," Gfeller says. "At the very end, she was just sobbing because she wasn't going to see Twig for another year. And in those very, very, very rare circumstances, a fairy might have whispered in her ear that fairies live in the hearts and imaginations of kids, and wherever you imagine us, even if you can't see us, we'll be there."

where Fantasy becomes reality

By BILL WARD • billward@startribune.com

The king and his court trade barbs atop a castle wall out Shakopee way as a motley crew, hundreds strong, awaits the opening of the gates to the Minnesota Renaissance Festival.

They bear vestments not unlike those of the royal coterie. Draped in a massive gray cloak, Andrew Nugent, 23, of Warroad gropes around inside his tall brown wizard's hat when a comely wench dashes by and fairly shouts, "Is this your little friend in there?"

Welcome to the rambunctious, often randy Ren Fest, where Minnesotans annually shed their passive-aggressive ways and don the attire and argot

of a bygone era.

And that's not even counting the actual performers, many of whom hail from Minnesota and make their living at such festivals nationwide.

Both groups help make the Ren Fest so, well, festive, not to mention it being one of the year's foremost people-watching events.

Ren Fest continues on E2 ►

MINNESOTA RENAISSANCE FESTIVAL

When: 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Sat.-Sun. through Oct. 2, plus Labor Day and Sept. 30. • **Where:** 7 miles south of Shakopee on Hwy. 169. • **Cost:** Adults \$20.95, ages 5-12 \$11.95, seniors \$18.95, 4 and under free, dogs \$10 with registration.

Info: www.renaissancefest.com

30 days of bedbugs

By JEFF STRICKLER
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Itching for the chance to talk about bedbugs? For the next month you've got an excuse to work the disgusting little creature into any conversation you want, regardless of how icky the topic might seem to your family, friends and co-workers.

September has been designated as the first National Bed Bug Awareness Month. The title alone almost makes it sound as if it's our patriotic duty to mention them as often as possible.

Granted, the impetus for focusing attention on the bugs comes mainly from the pest-control industry, which hopes to make money off the infestation. But it's also gotten the official seal of approval from at least one government official, Rep. Robert Dold, R-Ill., who has recorded a series of videos about the parasites that will be released periodically throughout the month (the folks at YouTube can hardly wait, we bet).

It's not as if we haven't been talking about bedbugs. To the contrary, a lot of people have gotten tired of talking about them, and that's part of the reason behind the campaign, organizers said. They're worried that we've started to become complacent about the problem.

And the fact that this is being billed as "the first" bedbug awareness month would indicate that more are likely to come.

Still, a whole month dedicated to the critters? Mothers, fathers, even the Earth only get one day a year. If we were more sensitive, this is the kind of thing that could get under our skin. □

where fantasy becomes reality

◀ REN FEST FROM E1

Sticking together

Who are the dudes in white and green outfits paired up and bouncing about, waving giant hankies and clacking sticks together while one plays a fife and drum? They look vaguely Irish, but this is no Riverdance.

"No. This is really, really English. It's not Celtic," says the white-haired Ed Stern, still spry at 69. "Oh, and beer had nothing to do with this."

Stern formed the outfit, the Minnesota Traditional Morris Dancers, in 1974, and this is their 37th Ren Fest.

Stern is a toxicologist. Members have included computer programmers, house painters, doctors, lawyers — and an actual professional dancer, Derek Phillips.

"We like dancing with each other," Phillips says. "We have fun and hope the fun part reaches the audience."



Photos by JERRY HOLT • jholt@startribune.com

Tuey juggled as he walked a flaming slack rope. The 45-year-old has been a street performer 30 years.

A truly hot act

"Nearest I can tell," barks the performance artist known as Tuey to passersby, "the concept is, if you burn it, they will come."

So there are flames galore at his low-wire act, not only around but on the rope, suspended a few feet above the ground, on which he juggles.

Hired as a festival street juggler in 1981, Steven "Tuey"

Wilson, 45, of Faribault developed his act over the years by adding performance bits and repartee to his already-formidable juggling skills.

His tricks are "blatant," he says. "They're short and really hard. The setup of the trick will take longer than the trick."

Multitasking, of course, is the key to his job, which includes being attentive while juggling and yakking astride a

burning rope.

"My rope has broken at least three times, when I light it on fire and don't pay attention," says Wilson, who just returned from entertaining on an Alaskan cruise. "Hopefully I've done enough of the trick that I can make it seem like it's supposed to be the end of the show."



Caleb McEwen, left, of the Danger Committee threw knives around his teammate, Jason LeMay.

Warning: Danger ahead

The Danger Committee sounds like an act more attuned to performing at corporate parties than a throwback festival. The Twin Cities trio of Caleb McEwen, Mick Lunzer and Jason LeMay are equally at home in both venues.

Their poofy Renaissance accoutrements — McEwen says his outfit "was inspired by Googling 'Renaissance men's clothes'" — and juggling tricks draw crowds to their show. But it's the witty banter and endless derring-do that keep fans "oohing" and "wowing."

Flying knives whiz mere millimeters away from body parts throughout the show. McEwen, who also is the artistic director at Brave New Workshop, says onstage, "We put our lives on the line in every show" — but confides later that there's never been a serious in-

jury. "I've never just embedded a knife in their chest," he says.

The only "America's Got Talent" act performing at Ren Fest, the Danger Committee modifies its program more for the locale than the era, with references to Minnesotans' passive-aggressiveness and penchant for cream-of-mushroom soup. Onstage, LeMay aptly calls the festival grounds "this strange and mysterious place that can be both muddy and dusty at the same time."

For these guys, all the world's a stage, no matter the era.

"Nowadays people are longing for a simpler time, a place to get away," McEwen says.

Adds LeMay: "But with enough 20th-century amenities that they can enjoy."

Lunzer: "Yeah, like the flat-screen TVs to watch the Vikings game at the next tent down."

If the garb fits ...

At least a third of the fans awaiting the 9 a.m. commencement of festivities dress in period garments. The wizardly Nugent epitomizes their approach: "I'm just showing up as I want to be," he says.

Nearby, a fair-haired maiden with a sweet smile, Liz Wahlestedt of Eagan, wears a chaplet and a brown dress that she says is supposed to look 14th-century Italian.

"But I can't vouch for that," says Wahlestedt, 59. "I wasn't around in the 14th century. I just like to pretend that I was. What a great excuse to get dressed up."

All dressed up

As the town historian in Amboy, Minn., Kelly Reuter is a natural Ren Fest aficionado. As a costume designer, she's also a natural to show up in a garland and period dress of indeterminate provenance.

"I wouldn't call it a peasant outfit," she says, "but it's not upper-class, either. Maybe more of a fantasy Renaissance outfit."

Reuter visited her first festival in 1974 and was hooked for life.

"My husband and I fell in love with it, this feeling of stepping back in time," she says. "You have the old oak tree and the secret garden and the fairies."

"You just get that feeling of stepping back into another era — without all the bad stuff that happened in that era."

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Costume designer Kelly Reuter of Amboy, Minn., dressed in a "fantasy Renaissance outfit."



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