



Love, Chaos
and Business

BEHIND THE SCENES AT TEATRO ZINZANNI

By John Kinmonth

Every day is a juggling act for Markus Kunz. And a comedy routine. And a trapeze show. In his role as managing director at Teatro ZinZanni, the list goes on and on.

A wildly popular mixture of circus, cabaret and theater, Teatro ZinZanni's tagline is "Love, Chaos and Dinner." Acrobats dangle from bars, opera singers belt out ironic tunes and gypsies juggle barrels precariously close to guests in the surreal setting of a European circus tent crafted by a famous Belgian family of tentmakers.

With a considerable reputation in theater circles, the intimate show regularly attracts top performers from all over the world, and although he's not a clown or an acrobat, Markus is no exception.

Since moving from Switzerland to Bellevue in 2006, his performance takes place behind the scenes as he works daily to make sure each evening is a success.

"There is no such thing as a typical day," he says. With many of the performers from Europe and Russia, it doesn't hurt that Markus speaks five languages fluently.

"I'm really in the people business," he says.

The idea for Teatro ZinZanni originated in 1992 when Norm Langill, president of the Northwest non-profit production company One Reel, walked into a weather-beaten tent on a Barcelona street and was immediately immersed into a whole new style of entertainment.

Inspired by his experience, the Bumbershoot Festival producer decided to bring a similar experience to Seattle. Finding one of 12 surviving tents created in the early 1900s by the Klessens family of Belgium, Norm unveiled the show in Seattle to sold-out audiences before moving it to San Francisco. Two years later, Norm procured another tent from the Klessens family and started the show again in Seattle in 2002.

"It's probably a category all of its own," Markus says. "The idea of Teatro ZinZanni is really being completely interactive. There's no traditional stage so the performers really mingle with the audience. The stage is the tent and the audience is part of



Photo by Keith Brofsky



Photo by Ken Howard

the action. It's the goal that a performer talks to every single patron of the tent."

The show changes every four months or so, with a different theme and menu. In June, Teatro ZinZanni will be transformed from gypsy love tale into a mock fashion show featuring special designs from local fashion phenomenon Luly Yang.

"The middle of the tent will be the runway," Markus says.

ZURICH TO ZINZANNI

Markus didn't simply run away to join the circus. Raised in a small Swiss town near Zurich, he was introduced to the theater arts at an early age.

Markus Kunz in the Teatro ZinZanni lobby.



Photo by Jen Draper

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"I grew up with a lot of theaters around, and my father was a college professor for modern literature. He started this theory of teaching students literature through theater, not just plays, but also a novel or poem," Markus says.

When he was a teenager, Markus decided that he would pursue a career in theater, but not on stage. Although he briefly attended an acting school in Zurich, he found his passion behind the scenes.

"I love acting, but I just decided it's not my career," he says. From there, Markus attended the University of Munich, earning the German equivalent of a Ph.D. in theater science, German linguistics and modern literature. During this time period, he further developed his views on theater.

"When I was studying in the 90s, the theater in Europe went into the direction of big productions and lots of special effects—it was kind of this postmodern, high-tech theater. I was intrigued by it in college, but realized this was a one-way street. It could only go so far and then it gets boring. It was sort of copying movies, but movies do it better," he says. Instead, Markus chose to go a

more intimate direction.

"Theater is a communication between a performer and an audience. We tend to forget that sometimes when we go into bigger theaters where we just sit in our chairs and watch what's happening on stage," he says. "To quote the French writer Artaud, 'Going to a theatre performance is like going to have surgery. The experience changes you physically. Leaving the performance, you are not the same person.'"

Markus finished his thesis and worked as artistic director at Teatro Dimitri, a well-known acting school and theater in Switzerland that produces talent for shows such as Cirque du Soleil. He went on to become the director of the largest theater festival in Switzerland.

In 2005, Markus had a chance meeting in Switzerland with Norm from One Reel, and the two immediately hit it off.

"We really just shared a lot of the same vision," he says. "He then basically offered me the job of managing director for the project. I didn't know if it was really serious, but immediately after, he invited me to Seattle to come see the show, and three months later we packed up and moved."



Photo by Keith Brofsky

Since working at Teatro ZinZanni, Markus has introduced the popular ZinZanni Institute for Circus Arts, which offers everything from summer camps for children to advanced classes for professionals. After last year's pilot program, this summer features the first full offering of camps and classes. The show's performers teach the courses.

"Some of them are fifth generation from European circus families. They're coming from such a long tradition of circus and performing," Markus says.

FROM BELLEVUE WITH LOVE

Markus' ties to the Northwest are not all professional. When attending University of Munich, a young backpacker from Bellevue named Jennifer Draper and her friend came to visit his roommate after a chance meeting in Greece. At the time, Markus was a young, very serious theater student with his long hair tied back in a ponytail.

"We immediately fell in love," Markus says. Jen ended up staying for several months before returning home. Not wanting to call it quits, they pursued a long-distance relationship for two years before giving in to logistics.

"We parted ways because I was still completely tied up in the university, and she had her life here,"

Markus says. They lost contact for eight years but were reunited when Jen found his address and sent a spontaneous happy birthday card with her e-mail address—a new technological development.

"Our relationship was prior to e-mail, and then all of a sudden there was e-mail and it was easier for us to communicate," he says. "We started e-mailing back and forth, and then she came to Europe for a job in London. When we met, it was the same story again—we fell in love."

Jen moved to Switzerland shortly afterward. She lived and worked there for five years, before they moved back to Bellevue.

"She had to go through culture shock for five years, so now it is my turn," Markus jokes. Markus and Jen have a two-year-old daughter named Mia that takes up much of their free time.

"Mia can be silly and be happy with it, which is something we forget to do," he says. "Seeing someone mesmerized by every little thing is a really good influence on me."

Meanwhile, the business of running one of Seattle's top entertainment draws continues to be a juggling act for Markus. And a comedy routine. And a trapeze show.

5 REFLECTIONS

FAVORITE BOOK:

"Hamlet"—I read this play at least once or twice a year. Shakespeare is the complete combination of tragedy and comedy.

FAVORITE FOOD:

Being in Seattle, I love seafood. I also love fruit and vegetables. I do miss the cheeses from Switzerland.

HERO/GREATEST INFLUENCE:

French author, performer and director named Artaud—I read his works, "Theater of Cruelty," when I was a teenager and it was very revealing to me. It confirmed what my future profession should be.

Also, I have to say my daughter is a huge hero to me. I learn daily from her. She's not afraid of anything.

BEST ADVICE:

It's important on a daily basis to continuously be aware that thoughts create the world and that everything you can imagine is real. The latter part is a Picasso quote. I continually remind myself of that.

FAVORITE ACTIVITY AT THE CLUB:

Getting a good sweat on the cardio machines. (Markus comes in at 5:30 nearly every morning.)