

Spice of life

'V' performance artists are the key to success of 'Ultimate Variety Show'

BY CAROLINE FONTEIN
Vegas.com

The variety show format is nothing new, but it has become a unique concept in Las Vegas. With so many shows featuring large production numbers and special staging effects, "V The Ultimate Variety Show," produced by David Saxe, is a welcome reminder that at the end of the day, genuine talent is what creates good entertainment.

"It's been an unbelievable success when you think about how many shows in Las Vegas come and go, but we have been very lucky," said Russ Merlin, one of the core acts in the show.

Part of that luck comes from the show's concept of featuring a non-stop succession of specialty acts. There are no fillers and the show has modest production elements to supplement each performer.

"With our show, if you are not shining [on stage] then there is nothing happening, there is nothing else to look at," said Merlin. It is a "real genuine entertainment experience. Instead of just sitting and watching the show, you feel like you are in it. We want that fourth wall to be broken down so we are really in your face."

The eclectic mix of international performers consists of nine core acts that rotate during the show's nightly schedule. The production company

V The Ultimate Variety Show
Where: V Theater at Planet Hollywood
When: 7 and 8:30 p.m. nightly.

is always on the lookout for the next best variety act to add in the show. The ever changing performers and their varied acts offer guests an exciting experience that changes nightly.

One minute you are laughing hysterically and then next minute you are amazed by someone's incredible strength — and people really get a full experience, said Merlin.

RUSS MERLIN

Merlin started his career as an entertainer at the age of 13 after being amazed by a friend at school who did a card trick. First he learned magic, and later on he added juggling and being a mime to his repertoire.

Before performing in "V The Ultimate Variety Show," Merlin traveled the world performing a silent act synchronized to music. He started adding a comedy bit to his routine and ended up with the act he has been performing in "V The Ultimate Variety Show" since it opened in 2002.

"I went from doing a silent act to doing a yelling act," joked Merlin.

His performance is one of the strangest acts in the show, as he does a comedy routine with four audience volunteers. Each is given an outrageous mask to wear and assigned a different gesture to make when Merlin taps them on the shoulder.

The volunteers' responses to Merlin's taps turn into a game based on a vaudeville routine. Over the years he has added more and more of

his own elements to the routine.

"I turned it into a silent ventriloquist act," said Merlin. "I turned people into puppets and instead of words I use actions. I get the same timing but without words."

While wearing their masks and acting out the different gestures, the volunteers seem to undergo a transformation where they are no longer themselves, and the frozen expression on their masks is now alive and in sync with what the rest of their body is doing. It is a mind boggling and hilarious sight to see.

"Those expressions on their faces don't change but they feel like they change. I think a big part of that is me having them do something that looks like what the masks would be doing," said Merlin.

Volunteers are a key part of Merlin's act. He searches for them at the beginning of his set by calling out people in the audience who look like they are having fun, but regardless of what they look like from their seats, their reactions are always different.

"The real secret is you have to let the volunteers be funny. When they do something that is not planned is when it's the most funny," said Merlin.

WALLY EASTWOOD

Wally Eastwood, a world renowned juggler, also integrates comedy into his act. With more than 20 years of performing in some 10,000-plus shows in Las Vegas, he is one of the city's most endearing entertainers and it is not hard to see why. Aside from his ability to amaze the audience

with his skills as a juggler, he also makes people laugh with his quick-witted humor and happy-go-lucky personality.

As the fifth generation from a family of acrobatic trapeze artists, Eastwood started his career as an entertainer at a young age. For some, the idea of growing up in a circus may sound a little crazy, but for Eastwood it was a normal way of life that included a lot of responsibility.

"As a kid I thought it was normal to wake up in a different city every day and to wake up and see elephants walking around," said Eastwood.

He explained that all of the children in the circus had a busy schedule that consisted of doing home school, having some time to play, practicing their craft, performing at night and then doing it all over again the following day.

Eastwood's first act was a unicycle routine that he started performing when he was 8 years old. By the time he was a teenager he had done almost every act in the circus, but juggling was his forte.

During his early teens he visited Las Vegas with his mother. After seeing a juggler perform in a show at the Stardust, he told his mom that it was his dream to one day to perform in Las Vegas.

In 1987 his dreams came true when he moved to Vegas to perform in "Splash" at the Riviera. He also performed in "Jubilee" at Bally's and in the company's sister show in Reno. He has been performing with "V The Ultimate Variety Show" since it opened. Three years ago he became a permanent performer and host of the show.

Eastwood opens with a mesmerizing juggling routine. His enthusiasm, paired with his mind boggling talent has everyone cheering.

"If you really want to enjoy the show and experience variety, start drinking," says Eastwood during the show. It's the first of many jokes that he tells during the evening. He reappears throughout the show with different and more amazing routines. The second time he appears, he starts by juggling hats, then demonstrates his ability to juggle ping pong balls in his mouth.

For his final and most impressive act in the show, he uses balls that he throws on a large keyboard. Each bounce results in a different note. It is incredible to see him rapidly throw the balls at the keyboard and then hear parts of familiar songs like "Funkytown," "Brick House" and "Fur Elise," among others.

Apart from headlining in Las Vegas, Eastwood has performed in more than 20 countries. Most recently he performed in a special tribute to Siegfried & Roy at the London Palladium in September 2008. Eastwood's performance received rave reviews and reiterated why he has become known as having the "fastest hands on Earth."

TAMARA YEROFEYEVA

Many of the acts in "V The Ultimate Variety Show" use humor to delight the audience while others rely on their amazing abilities. Tamara



Russ Merlin

Photos Courtesy V Theater



Tamara Yerofeyeva

Yerofeyeva, a Ukrainian rhythmic gymnast, is one of the latter.

She started practicing gymnastics when she was 7 years old as a way for her parents to get her energy focused on something productive. What started as a solution for her parents turned into an accomplished career for Yerofeyeva as a professional gymnast.

Yerofeyeva has competed all over the world and has won numerous medals. She performed in the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, and in 2001 and 2002 she won multiple gold medals at the World Gymnastics Championships in China, Spain and the United States.

After feeling as though she had accomplished all that she could as a professional gymnast, Yerofeyeva wanted to pursue a different path that would still allow her to perform. She was approached by Cirque du Soleil and joined their touring company. While visiting Las Vegas during one of her breaks she saw "V The Ultimate Variety Show" and was impressed by how entertaining it was. She found out that David Saxe was holding auditions in Las Vegas and took her chances.

"I was very surprised that I got the job because there were about 300 performers who did a great job with their act. It was such an honor to be chosen out of so many people," said Yerofeyeva, who has been performing in the show since 2007.

For her act she performs a solo rhythmic gymnastics routine with hoops. Her graceful movements amaze the audience as she demonstrates a series of beautiful poses while spinning a hoop on her legs or arms. She gradually adds more hoops while continuing to move and dance around the stage.

Being able to perform and share her talent with others is a dream come true for Yerofeyeva and the audience response to her act proves that she is not the only one who feels honored to be there.

She explained that performing in competitions involves vigorous training and a lot of pressure, but when it comes to show business it is more of an enjoyable experience.

"I don't worry about my sport or my mistakes I just perform for the audience, and if I make them happy then I am happy," said Yerofeyeva.



Wally Eastwood