



Threads on Stilts

Costume planning from the Bay Area

BY INKA BAJANDAS

Sure, costumes make the Oregon Country Fair. But no matter where you're taking in the sights and sounds, it shouldn't be hard to spot the Chicken Little Stilt Troupe Supreme roaming along the trails. For one thing, they're on stilts, so they stand out from much of the crowd, but what's even more noticeable about them are their matching, special, crazy costumes.

The Bay Area troupe members go out of their way to create the most absurd, silly, flashy and outrageous matching costumes possible. Over the years they've dressed up as everything from rubber chickens to mosquitoes, fried eggs and Venus fly traps

in order to surprise and delight Fair visitors. Acting in the character of their costumes, the 14-member stilt troupe walks the Fair, aiming to be seen by and interact with as many people at the fair as possible.

"My whole goal in walking is making people feel like they're five years old again," says troupe member Robert Studdiford. He enjoys getting people to laugh at the absurdity of his appearance, taking advantage of them being more relaxed than normal at the Fair. For example, when he dressed up as a rubber chicken in orange spandex, rubber gloves and a bathing cap, he says, "I looked so stupid. All you're going to do is giggle at me."

Troupe member Eugene Palmer says,

"We add a measure of surprise, sort of larger than life characters, something really unusual and very much specific to the Oregon Country Fair." And they don't really appear anywhere else, he says, just the Fair.

Every year since 1980 the troupe has chosen a theme before the Fair and "driven it into the ground," says Studdiford, usually making it as silly as possible. They try to do something different every year. The planning for the theme and costumes starts long before the Fair: They brainstorm ideas for theme and the costumes about a year ahead of time. Then several months before the Fair, they settle on an idea and begin gathering the materials for costumes. Then they meet up in their free time (all have day jobs) for work parties.

Studdiford and Palmer say that they and the rest of the troupe do this every year just because they love the experience so much, especially since they spend almost a whole

paycheck on materials for their elaborate costumes. "We're really in it for a good time, a good camping weekend," says Palmer.

Most the money goes into fabric, such as when they bought out two fabric stores' stocks of blue sequined fabric to drape over a bamboo structure creating blue birds. Then there are various accessories, such as when they bought 28 colanders to be mosquito eyes, and each of the members also had a straw with a slit in to blow through for that lovely mosquito buzzing sound. "It's those silly little things that you come up with," says Studdiford. "It's a ridiculous amount of effort to go through to be stupid. ... It goes through this huge process to get it right."

Putting all that work into the costumes and traveling all that way is worth it, says Palmer. "When we step out onto that hay field, we're always just full of smiles."

The way the troupe interacts with fairgoers can vary widely, depending on the costume. Sometimes the group members are extremely passive, as when they were a flock of blue birds, and just pass through the crowd. When they were salmon, Studdiford says, "We didn't say anything. We just swam." A lot of the time, though, they're more silly, in-your-face characters like the Venus fly traps trapping people — or sunny side up fried eggs singing the song "Stay on the Sunny Side."

"We're out there to make a good fun visual impact," says Palmer. He doesn't consider the group to be performers. They usually improvise their interactions with their audience while most of their effort goes into their costumes. "I consider us visual art. We're not theater," he says.

Palmer says the trip out to the Fair has become a big family event for the troupe members. Studdiford's two children, aged 12 and 14, stilt walk, too. Palmer says, "That's what's been more fun about going lately. Watching the kids start to take it on and bring their own characters."

Studdiford loves how free he feels at the Fair. He takes on a whole other persona, he says, saying and doing things he wouldn't otherwise do. "I like what I do. To me the Fair is one place where our magic really works." ★



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