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Flying Karamazov Brothers join others for Christmas Spectacular

By Joanne Fox Journal staff writer

The Flying Karamazov Brothers are not brothers, not Russian and they don't fly.

But they view their Eastern European moniker as part of the fun of their unique theatrical presentation which will be part of the Sioux City Symphony's Christmas Spectacular on Saturday.

The Flying Karamazov Brothers have been "in the biz" since 1973 performing everywhere on the stages of the most prestigious theatres from Singapore to Scotland and they've toured through every state in the Union. They've also enjoyed six successful and critically acclaimed runs on Broadway.

"Sure it's a nod and wink when you hear the name," said Mark Ettinger, who has been a "brother" for the past 12 years. "Originally, I think the group was called something like Ye Olde Brothers in Faith, which didn't work. So one of the originators saw some parallels between the ages and personalities in the troupe and thought it would be fun to embrace the Karamazov name and add 'Flying' because we juggle.

He then clarified, "Quite honestly, it's been lost on most people."

Combining comedy, theatre, music and, of course, juggling, the "brothers" have blended the worlds of performance art, improvisation, word play, harmony, emotion and, above all, virtuosity into a unusual form of theater and entertainment.

"We bring art and comedy to the stage, and we layer it on so that children of 2 or 92 will laugh at the same moment for very different reasons," Ettinger said.

Each of the Brothers brings his area of expertise to the presentation. Ettinger (Alexei) is the resident musician, composer and conductor. Rod Kimball (Pavel) is the master juggler. Nick Flint (Maximov) is the actor and media savant. Paul Magid (Dmitri) is the writer, director, and a founder.

"I had conducted been associated with the group as a 'friend' for at least 20 years, then 12 years ago, started conducting them and then 10 years ago, they needed a musician and a somebody who was a competent juggler," said Ettinger, who is classically trained as a conductor. "I worked very, very hard to master the juggling."

And the juggling is the signature move for the group.

"It's a complex dynamic for the show because it has to click so many ways," Ettinger said.

As most folks know who watch jugglers, it's an "anathema" to drop anything, Ettinger said. Not so for the Flying Karamazov Brothers.

"It's like jazz," he said in comparison. "If a note is played wrong, the group improvises around it. For us, if something is dropped, we incorporate that element into the performance."

That's half of the fun, Ettinger pointed out.

"What do you do when that item is 30 feet away from you?" he asked. "Sure, jugglers who don't drop something are doing brilliant performances, but they lack the spontaneity of what-do-you-do-when-something-goes-wrong that we have."

While the group is juggling, they're also making music, said Ettinger, hitting drums with the items being juggled. There's movement and singing and improvisational comedy.

"It's the most difficult thing I've ever done as a performer," Ettinger admitted. "It's vaudeville and it's very demanding because timing is paramount in our performance."

Though generally performing only as themselves, The Flying Ks have shared the stage with Frank Sinatra, The Grateful Dead, Dolly Parton, Robin Williams, and Kenny Rogers. They have also performed two separate shows (In Concert and Life Begins at Forte) with numerous symphony orchestras around the country, including The Boston Pops, The Hollywood Bowl Orchestra, and in 2003 with The Cincinnati Pops at Carnegie Hall.

The Brothers appeared on an episode of Seinfeld as The Flying Sandos Brothers and, as themselves, on Ellen and the PBS shows Bill Nye, the Science Guy and Mr. Roger's Neighborhood. The Flying Karamazov Brothers co-starred, with Michael Douglas, Kathleen Turner, and Danny De Vito, in the hit movie, "The Jewel of the Nile."

In addition to the Flying Karamazov Brothers, the Christmas Spectacular will feature George Lindblade's special video of Siouxland in winter, the Siouxland Youth Chorus Concert Choir, the Western Iowa Tech Community College Choir, the Siouxland Civic Dance Association, special lighting, decorative sets, costumes, Santa and snow in the Orpheum, said Doug Gerhart, executive director of the Sioux City Symphony.
