

THWAK Attack!

The Umbilical Brothers Bring Their Unique Comedy to Amaturio Theater

By Mary Damiano

When David Collins and Shane Dundas met in an Australian acting school, they spontaneously choreographed a Jackie Chan fight scene together and knew they were on the same wavelength. "We were walking the same line," Collins says. The Umbilical Brothers were born.

If you can imagine a live-action cartoon, all sped up, slowed down and backwards, then you've got an inkling of what The Umbilical Brother are all about.

"Pop culture is crazy these days, and a lot of it takes itself seriously, so it's ripe."

Their show, *THWAK*, is a fast-paced joyride into the imagination zone. Except for a backdrop that looks like one of the brick walls Wile E. Coyote used to try and trap the Roadrunner, and a large piece of plywood, the duo employ almost no other props. Instead, they rely on their minds, physicality and the audience's imaginations to create an original piece of live theater.

The Umbilical Brothers' comedy is a perfect balance of improvisation and detailed rehearsal. In other words, a lot of work goes into making the show look spontaneous. "It has to seem as if the whole thing is happening off the cuff," says Dundas. "Structurally, it's carefully planned. All that weird stuff that happens was meant to happen."

The title *THWAK* comes from a comic book, one of those words used as a sound effect on the page. "It's sort of the noise that the show makes when it hits you," says Dundas. Collins and Dundas always hope the show goes *THWAK* instead of *SQUELCH*. "Much less sexy title, *Squelch*," Dundas says.

THWAK is a unique experience. "One of the pleasures of doing our show is that it attracts a broad audience, not necessarily regular theater-goers," says Dundas. "It may get people who never go to theater, because it contacts other media, movies and that sort

of stuff. It's a pop culture show, and maybe it will get people interested in seeing theater who don't usually see theater."

The duo's own taste in theater runs toward physical comedy. "It's not usually two people in a drawing room," says Dundas. "I prefer the drawing room to be on the very edge of a cliff, and teetering throughout the whole show, so there's some element that's thrown in there to take the whole universe out of whack."

"I like going to see a show that gives me at least one thing that I've never seen before," says Collins. "I like theater to be theater of the imagination, theater that uses the audience as much as they're using any other technique on stage. Without the audience's imagination, our show wouldn't exist."

Presenting *THWAK* in America required some adjustments. "This country differs from the rest of the world," Collins says. "Jokes had to have a context, a beginning middle and end. We couldn't just do weird stuff for weird sake."

Dundas agrees. "Audiences here want a story to hang things on," he says. "The narrative aspect of the show is stronger in America than it would be in another country. We do a lot of stuff that goes off on real tangents in other countries. Here, it's more the brother-sibling rivalry aspect of it that's providing the spine for the show."

It's that gentle rivalry that exists between true friends that is at the heart of this wacky partnership. During *THWAK*, they each take all the credit for writing the show and making all the imaginary props. Dundas and Collins are best friends and hang out together when they're not working, hence the name, The Umbilical Brothers, which

refers to their deep, separated-at-birth kind of connection. They've been working together since their 1988 meeting in drama school.

"They actually tried to keep us separated in school," Dundas says. "We were doing things that weren't on the curriculum, injecting a fight scene into a jazz ballet routine." The school was not amused, but Collins and Dundas knew they were onto something.

In 1991 they won the grand prize on Australia's *Star Search*, and that same year, performed in *Two Coats and a Hatstand from Hell*, their first professional theater experience. Three years later they were performing their show *Don't*

Explain to sold-out crowds at the Edinburgh festival. They toured and won awards for their next

a six-week run in L.A. In addition to touring with *THWAK*, The Umbilical Brothers are working on their new show, *Speed Mouse*.

THWAK is so physical and strenuous that Dundas says that if they do a whole season of shows, they don't have to work out in their off time. "That is our workout," he says. "It's like doing aerobics every night. Aerobics from hell."

Dundas studied Japanese and lived in Japan for a year and then worked in an office for two years before becoming a performer. He already had a degree in languages when he went to drama school.

"This is nothing like what I expected to do," Dundas says. "I went to acting school to learn how to *act*. This was meant to be a sideline. But it is acting. It's very sneaky acting, because people don't think it's acting."

Collins is a different story. "None of that stuffing about for me," Collins says. "I just knew that I had to perform. It's the only thing I ever really enjoyed doing as a job."

While Collins is the extrovert, the kid who was always in a show, Dundas describes himself as the quiet kid. "I did my performing in my mind or with my friends on the playground."

Their ideas come from recognizable situations that get out of hand and pop culture. "Pop culture is crazy these days, and a lot of it takes itself seriously, so it's ripe," Dundas says. The show is structured to allow for audience vibes and feedback. The Umbilical Brothers can tweak the show while it's in progress depending on the audience's reactions.

One of the pitfalls of being so original is that they don't have a name for that they do.

"It will be known as the Umbilical Way," Collins jokes.

Dundas sums up their shows as an onstage movie in progress. "I wanted to direct movies, actually, and I think in a way that's what we do," says Dundas. "We're kind of directing our own movies in 3-D on stage, our own little action movies."

David Collins is the one with curly hair and Shane Dundas is the one without curly hair

show, *Heaven By Storm*. They made their New York debut in 1999 with *THWAK*, and received a Drama Desk nomination for Unique Theatrical Performance. The show ran off-Broadway in Greenwich Village and last year enjoyed

THWAK runs through November 11 at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts Amaturio Theater. Tickets are \$27 and \$29. For more info, call 954.462.0222.

Gay Night Announced for Broward County Fair

Perennial SoFla Event Corners New Market

For the first year ever, the hugely popular Broward County Fair has announced that Tuesday, November 20 will be GLCC Night.

The Fair, which is in its 26th year, will offer reduced admission and an unlimited ride special between the hours of 7 and 10 pm to anyone wearing a red shirt or with a Gay and Lesbian Community Center membership card.

The Fair has also announced that 10% of every admission will be donated back to the GLCC.

The normal admission price of \$8 will be discounted to \$5, and an unlimited ride pass will be priced at \$12 instead of the normal \$15. Anyone under 50" tall will be admitted to the grounds for free.

R&B group 112 will be performing a free concert on GLCC night at 7 pm.

The Broward County Fair has been an institution in South Florida for decades. This year's Fair, which runs from November

15-25 at the Pompano Harness Track in Pompano Beach, features the same mix of rides, games, booths, exhibits, events and attractions that have made it a yearly staple.

This year, two new features will accompany past favorites such as the Animal

Arena and the Backyard Circus. The Maximum Velocity Extreme Bike and Skate Show has been added, as well as caricatures by Al the Artist who will travel around in his colorful Cartoon Car creating complimentary pictures in souvenir posters.

The Fair's famous Midway will also be back with over 100 rides, games, and attractions. New rides will include the Fire Ball 2000 Super Loop, a new-and-improved version of the traditional favorite, Ring of Fire.

Another first for the Fair this year will be the offer of an X-treme pass for only \$55, which includes parking, admission and unlimited rides every day except Thanksgiving.

The Broward County Fair is a not-for-profit corporation whose main mission is to showcase agri-business, Broward County's number one revenue producer. It is ranked in the Top 50 fairs in North America and has donated more than \$1.5 million to Broward students through the years.

According to fair spokesman Karen Conway de Salazar, the Fair is needed more than ever this year. "This is a good time to have a major community event that is [positive] and we have a lot for everybody this year," she says.

For more information on the Fair and a full schedule, visit the official Broward County Fair website at www.browardcountyfair.com.

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