



Virginia Arts Festival thinks outside of the box office

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NORFOLK

A few hundred people of all ages, but mostly families with kids, gathered on a downtown lawn across from Virginia Arts Festival headquarters. Their heads were tilted back, a look of amused awe on their faces.

They watched four clowns - two boys in top hats and tails, two girls in red and purple wigs and hoop skirts longer than their bodies - climb 16-foot-tall poles, strap themselves in at the top, and put on a show.

While tethered to the pole tops, the men tussled with each other and went after the women, hugging them rapturously whenever they caught one in midair. The mood changed throughout the 25-minute show. It was a comedy act, then an abstract modern dance piece, then a quirky romance. They spoke no words; shifts were triggered by music.

Strange Fruit, an Australia-based troupe that is equal parts dance, theater and circus, came here to be part of the arts festival. Nightly through Tuesday, they are performing a piece called "Swoon!"

Julie Moberly and her husband, Steve Velotas, brought their 9-year-old twin girls on Friday because "it looked intriguing, and it's free," Moberly said. "And it's a beautiful night."

Strange Fruit is not an isolated program of this sort. It's part of a noticeable trend this spring: a profusion of free outdoor arts offerings in downtown Norfolk.

Strange Fruit was inspired by a Melbourne artist's sleeping dream.

Rod Poole envisioned a field of swaying wheat topped by little people in brightly colored clothes. From that, he created a performance art piece in 1994 that featured him swaying atop a pole, tour director Nami Hall said last week from her home in New York City.

Poole no longer is involved, but the concept jelled into a company that performs atop flexible fiberglass poles.

On Friday and Saturday nights, before and after the Strange Fruit presentations, the Virginia Arts Festival also sent forth a few dozen dancers to perform across the street on Scope Plaza to the music of Maurice Ravel's "Bolero."

Members of Keigwin + Company, a New York-based contemporary dance company, led about 50 local people in a two-week residency sponsored by the arts festival. Together, the professional and community dancers, dressed in white and carrying white and blue balloons, danced in pairs and clusters for about 15 minutes in a flash mob-type show.

Following weekend performances downtown, the festival headquarters on Bank Street were lit up by large-scale images projected on the exterior. The vibrant light show will continue through Tuesday night. "Stylized images of our artists," festival director Rob Cross explained.

The 16-year-old festival never had such a visible street presence before. Last month, the lawn across from festival headquarters featured an interactive video projection piece for 10 nights by the Montreal artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.

"Airborne" was presented by the Chrysler Museum of Art in partnership with the arts festival. All ages showed up after dark to gyrate and wave their arms before the projectors to make the letters in the projected poems scatter and their figures emit swirling smoke.

"We were trying to figure out how to make the festival feel more festive," Cross said. He's been influenced by the Edinburgh International Festival in Scotland, which offers loads of free street entertainment.

Ticket buyers who enter theaters where events are going on can sense the nationally noted festival's vibrancy. Those not in the venues are less aware.

"We wanted to create an energy around the community," Cross said.

City dwellers might also have noticed more free performing and visual arts outdoors, aside from the region's many decades-old outdoor art shows that take place each summer.

A confluence of initiatives created the coincidence.

Certainly, the Better Block project that remade two blocks of Granby Street in April for a well-attended weekend used the arts as a means to lure locals and give the rundown stretch new life.

Among the features was a project by artist David Johnson and Anne Bousquet that was funded by the city's public art program. They printed comic sayings on signs that citizens may hoist as they stroll a crosswalk, such as one reading "The View is Better on the Other Side."

The city of Norfolk also wants to bring downtown to life with arts encounters, which led to the Granby Street Experiences that started last September.

The second one took place along Granby Street on April 19 and included stages for Norfolk-based arts groups such as The Hurrah Players and Virginia Opera.

The city partnered with the arts festival on that one and will again for two more art parties this year, in late summer and again in October, said Lori Crouch, the city's public relations manager.

More than bolstering an arts scene, Crouch said such free programs "are really about meeting and greeting and getting to know your neighbors - and experiencing something new."

Moberly and Velotas and their daughters, Jackie and Meghan, laughed and grinned through Strange Fruit's show.

"I thought it was just magical," Velotas said. "It was really interesting the way they combined acrobatics and dance. I'm amazed none of them got dizzy."

"To me," Moberly said, "this was the closest simulation to flying in your dreams that I've seen."

Velotas said the performance reminded him of Cirque de Soleil.

Jackie: "Except they're not in a trapeze."

Meghan: "It just seemed like it's all in a dream, to be floating around in the air like you want."

Moberly: "We, as a family, love going to these events. It opens the girls to new experiences. And you never know what that will lead to."