

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Exploration of Greed

Open Fist presents world premiere of 'The Great Clown Bank Show'

By Laura Latzko

LA Downtown News Staff Writer

Through "The Great Clown Bank Show," an immersive theater production, Hank Jacobs explores the spectacle of greed in glamorous, glitter-filled and grotesque ways. The show centers around the Greedy family, a group of scheming clowns, who driven by their lust for money and power create a powerful clown bank dynasty.

Open Fist Theatre Company will present the world premiere of the show Saturday, June 27, to Saturday, Aug. 1 at Atwater Village Theatre.

Founded in 1990, Open Fist is a self-producing artistic enterprise run by a collective of actors, playwrights, directors and designers, under the direction of artistic director Martha Demson.

The new show has risqué language and situations, and parental guidance is recommended for anyone under 13.

The production is being directed by and stars Jacobs as ringmaster. It features music from his brother, Stephen Jacobs, and Michael Messer, who have played together in the Dirty Sock Funtime Band.

In an interview with the LA Downtown News, Hank Jacobs, who is now based out of Los Angeles but hails from Minneapolis, shared that he has been interested in the circus arts since he was young.

A writer, producer, director, editor and actor, he became part of the Theatre De La Jeune Lune at age 15.

His new show was influenced by his work with this company, which often puts on theatrical, homegrown circuses and incorporates clown, mime, dance and operatic styles.

Jacobs moved to New York in his early twenties and ran Delicious Vaudeville for

two years in different locations.

During his career, he has worked as a mime, clown and go-go dancer.

Jacobs has worked with Open Fist for the last 10 years. He had been featured in their show "BOTH: A Hard Days Silent Night."

Jacobs did a similar type of show as "The Great Clown Bank Show" in New York City years ago, but it was more a vaudeville variety show. With his new show, he wanted to incorporate more sketch comedy and topical political humor.

"I felt the circus was a really good and important way to take on the inequality and the public social madness that we are living in right now," Jacobs said. "In this one, I wanted to create a throughline. I created a family... They are stand-in for famous families in our world right now who are clowning us and who are completely corrupt and completely transparent about their corruption."

The show follows three generations within this clown family.

"I wanted it to represent different eras of American greed. The oldest generation, they represent the old timey robber barons, your Carnegies and your Fricks... The next generation is Reagan-era/80s greed, the Gordon Gekko-style. The youngest generation is our cold-hearted tech billionaires of today, the ones who can destroy us all with an algorithm," Jacobs said.

Jacobs incorporates banking concepts throughout the show.

"We have these 15 acts, and through these 15 acts, we studying aspects of modern capitalism and banking in particular. So, there's scenes about outsourcing. There's scenes about bank holidays. There's scenes about creative accounting and mass layoffs. I'm taking on a lot of the less savory qualities of

modern banking through circus," Jacobs said.

Jacobs said with the show, he wanted to delve into how greed can change people.

"What is it about greed that makes us so obsessed that we would lose track of who we are as human beings? What is worth losing your humanity over? Is it money? Is it status? Is it adulation? We don't know, but that's part of what we are exploring," Jacobs said.

Each week, the satirical show will have performances from different circus performers, including a magician and hula hoop artist.

Aerialist Avery Lynch will be spotlighted throughout the show's run.

Many of the actors in the show come from sketch comedy backgrounds and have done Open Fist's This Week, This Week! sketch comedy and improv show. There are also cast members with clowning and musical theater experience. Jacobs said that actors didn't have to have previous clowning experience to do the show. The type of clowning he presents is inspired by new vaudeville/European styles.

"I don't really care for the birthday party clown with big, crazy, scary face paint. I want the face painting to be somewhat minimal. I still want to see the actor underneath. I want to feel them underneath. I'm not looking for the type of clowning with rainbow wigs, baggy pants and giant shoes, although we play with those stereotypes," Jacobs said.

Jacobs said some of the actors in the show were afraid of clowns when they started. They have been able to get over this fear by inhabiting and finding their own version of a clown.

"We've had number of rehearsals where we've been discovering what is your clown? What does your clown look like? What kind of face is coming through? It starts from within, and how does it express itself?" Jacobs said. "I want the makeup to have a lived-in feel... They sleep with the clown makeup on. They wake up, and it's smeared, and they just go out in the world. It's who they are... In terms of how each actor is going to embody them



Ensemble of "The Great Clown Bank Show."

(Open Fist Theatre Company/Submitted)

and discover them, that's been a large part of our rehearsal process."

One of the actresses, Clara York, has experience as a makeup artist and has been helping the cast with clown makeup.

The show challenges the actors, who are asked to go outside their comfort zones.

"There's a lot of risk taking that comes in physical theater," Jacobs said. "You've got to trust the people you're with. You've got to trust your director. You've got to trust that what you're doing is going to work. There's a sequence where people are inside a full body stocking. They can't really see what's going on. They still have to move around the stage. They've got to do it together, and they've got to trust each other. Those have been some pretty contentious rehearsals, I can tell you, but it looks really cool."

For the show, they have remade the theater space to give the audience the feeling of being at a circus. They will offer carnival games and photo op areas.

"We have seating on three sides, and there's a circle in the middle. The word 'circus' comes from any entertainment that's done within the circle... We wanted to create an experience that's completely curated. When you walk in, you're in that vibe. You're experiencing things. We're getting you ready to come in and play, to be open, to be receptive, to be uninhibited in the way that you watch the show," Jacobs said.

Learn more at greatclownbank.com.

OPEN FIST THEATRE COMPANY'S PRODUCTION OF "THE GREAT CLOWN BANK"

WHEN: Saturday, June 27-Saturday, August 1

WHERE: Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Avenue, Los Angeles.

Parking free at ATX parking lot one block south of theater

COST: \$26-\$40.

INFO: openfist.org