

Living

COLUMBUS LEDGER-ENQUIRER

**DAVE'S
BRIGHT
IDEA**

 Hold on,
California: Help
is on the way

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SECTION E



Vaudeville auditions
draw theater hopefuls
to the Rylander stage

Amateur hour



Top: Patrick Brochu tests a fire brand with his tongue during a performing workshop at the Rylander Theatre in Americus.

Middle: Llana Burrows steps lively as she leads a dance tryout.

Right: Alia Sabbe watches as a dance step is demonstrated.



AMERICUS, Ga. — Michael Straka was amazed that almost everyone volunteered to eat fire.

"Usually, maybe one or two will volunteer," he said. "Today, everyone but the little boy and one of the adults did it."

Straka, who ran away with the circus when he was a teen-ager, is now an all-around entertainer who can eat fire, juggle and do magic tricks. He was on hand at the historic Rylander Theatre last month to conduct a variety-act workshop in preparation for the community vaudeville production, "Following Our Fannie: The Adventures of Fannie Fakename, Part 1: In Search of a Happy Ending."

The man behind this mouthful of a name is Tom DeTitta, director of World Communities: Center for Community-Based Theater at

Georgia Southwestern State University in Americus.

The play is the second of three he's creating for the Rylander. The first was "And Grace Will Lead Me Home: The American POW Drama," produced last year; the final one will be a piece about President Jimmy Carter.

Because the other two plays are so serious, the idea of doing vaudeville — which usually includes comedy routines, song-and-dance and juggling or acrobatic acts — appealed to DeTitta.

"Vaudeville theater didn't die, it evolved," he said. "It showed up in the circus" and in things like "Stupid Human Tricks" on "The Late Show With David Letterman."

"Following Our Fannie" is about a woman named Fannie Fakename who

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goes off in search of a happy ending. The play is structured in a way that incorporates all the silly vaudeville aspects from the early part of the 20th century with modern theater.

"It's all in the spirit of burlesque," DeTitta said. The audience will see baggy-pants comedians, magicians, tap dancers and singers, and of course, a damsel in distress.

To cast the play, DeTitta is using auditions and workshops to find local actors, singers and dancers, as well as residents with those "stupid human trick"-type talents.

Among the dozen or so who turned up for the January workshop were Patrick and Jamie Terry, creators of the Terry Brothers' Magic Show.

About four years ago,

"Vaudeville theater didn't die, it evolved. It showed up in the circus."

Tom DeTitta, creator of the vaudeville show *Following Our Fannie: The Adventures of Fannie Fakename, Part 1: In Search of a Happy Ending*

Patrick, 16, was in a play with a magician who refused to share his tricks with the youngster. "I had to look it up myself. So I got some tricks together and practiced on Jamie."

Among their favorites is the one where Patrick pretends to chop off Jamie's fingers. "Some people get pretty

SHERRI LAROSE *Ledger-Enquirer*

Don Baker of Wilmington, N.C., keeps an eye out for talent during vaudeville auditions at the Rylander Theatre in Americus. Baker, a free-lance director, said he is looking forward to seeing the finished product on stage. "This is such wonderful space," he said of the historic theater.

SHERRI LAROSE *Ledger-Enquirer*

James Larussa, 6, limbers up along with Krista Hasinger, center, and Alia Sabbs before the dance portion of *Following Our Fannie* tryouts at the Rylander Theatre.

scared about it," said Jamie, 14.

The brothers, who say they love the audience and applause "and other things that start with an 'A,'" were also the first to put their hands up to try fire-eating.

Joining them was John Henry Spann, 11. "It was scary," he said. "But once you get it (the fire) in your mouth, you're OK."

"It tasted like gas," said Patrick Brochu, 15. Kara Barentine, 18, rolled her eyes at that comment.

"It was kind of hot," Kara said. "It was definitely an adrenaline rush."

Patrick, though, after the first attempt, got bolder. He

managed to "swallow" the flame and then shoot it back out. After being congratulated, he sheepishly admitted it was mere luck.

After the fire-eating session, there was a short juggling lesson with clubs, which bounced all over the stage.

Later, Columbus native Llana Burrows, who now owns a dance studio in Americus, led a dance combination to music from *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Several teen-agers from her studio studied the steps and, after a few tries, had the routine down perfectly.

But most, amid much laughter, stumbled through the combination.

Next came Straka's wife,

Roberta, who is an actor, singer, dancer and magician's assistant. She showed her charges a tap combination. While some put on tap shoes, others just made do with what they had on.

All looked like they were having fun.

Director Don Baker of Wilmington, N.C., said he is looking for people who can't dance as well as those who can.

"This is such a fun piece," Baker said about the play. "I was interested in tackling it. A good bunch of people showed up."

Contact Sandra Okamoto at (706) 571-8580.

If you go

What: An audition and vaudeville workshop for *Following Our Fannie: The Adventures of Fannie Fakename, Part 1: In Search of a Happy Ending*, by Tom DeTitta of Americus. "Stupid human trick"-type acts are needed as well as traditional actors, dancers and singers.

When: Auditions at 6-9 p.m. Feb. 23 and workshop at 2-4:30 p.m. Feb. 24; show opens in June

Where: Rylander Theatre, 310 W. Lamar St., Americus

Information: (229) 931-0001 or www.rylander.org