

Cutlines:

BREAK A WING - At left, Chief Trainer Dan Frankian, of Halton, holds Clara, a star on the Stratford Festival stage, while trainer and handler Julia Staines, of Ayr, holds Barb, Clara's understudy. The cages for the two Harris Hawks have been jazzed up to reflect their star status at the main Festival stage. In the world of theatre, the expression "break a leg" is the traditional way of wishing a fellow actor - or in this case "break a wing" - good luck.

Ayr's Festival Connection

What a Way for Clara To Launch King Arthur

by Ron Carson

Clara and Barb fly from rags to riches all in the same day.

In the morning the two Harris Hawks spend their time scaring gulls from a garbage dump and in the evening they literally help launch one of the Stratford Festival's featured 2011 musicals.

Yes, Clara and Barb are genuine stage stars. They each have their own cage with their names outlined with stars to indicate their status. As it turns out it's Clara who gets the applause because she is the principal actor, but, Barb is the dedicated understudy just waiting in the wings for Clara to break a wing.

This season's Stratford Festival production of Camelot opens with King Arthur - in the form of a bird - being summoned by the Magician Merlyn. To the delight and surprise of the audience, Clara - playing King Arthur - takes flight from a high balcony and flies to the arm of Merlyn (played by Brent Carver). The audience gasps and applauds.

Clara is then transformed in the human form of King Arthur (played by Geraint Wyn Davies). Clara's cameo role comes to a quick end but she leaves quite an impression on theatregoers.

In fact, trainer and Ayr resident Julia Staines said some audience members remark after the show on how life-like the bird prop appeared. But, make no mistake, Clara and Barb are real Harris Hawks, born in Canada but with the species native to the Southwestern United States.

The birds took to their performance relatively easily, said Julia, and, of course, it's all done by way of a reward system which is a small piece of tasty quail at the end of each flight - the standard food for captive birds of prey.

Birds of prey need between 55 and 75 grams of high-protein quail a day, depending on what they are required to do. Birds of prey used for hunting receive a little less to keep them keen.

Julia said the Festival experience for her is a lot of fun and relatively short. She has the birds at the main Festival Theatre by the park in good time before an 8 p.m. performance. "That allows Brent Carver (playing Merlyn and Pellinore) to greet Clara before they take to the stage." When the stunt is completed, they're on their way home by 8:30 p.m.

"Clara flies the entire stage . . . it's time to the second and Clara even uses the call of 'Arthur' by Merlyn as her cue to start her flight . . . so far there hasn't been one problem with her performance," said Julia.

While the birds live 24-7 with Julia in her apartment on Colquhoun Street in Ayr, Clara and Barb are owned by Dan Frankian, Chief Trainer and CEO of Hawkeye Bird and Animal Control with head offices in Halton. Dan, who was born in Lebanon and came to Canada in 1976, is one of Canada's top bird of prey experts.

Dan's business employs 16 staff including a number of bird handlers. He currently has about 14 birds of prey which are primarily used for pest control at landfill sites, airports and at corporate buildings. As well, Dan, 46, uses his birds of prey for falconry-tourism functions and for television, film and stage performances.

Julia, 29, a native of Kitchener, worked for the Kitchener Humane Society for eight years. She met Dan on occasions when he would be called to the Kitchener Human Society to pick up an injured bird of prey, a service the Hawkeye Bird and Animal Control provides free of charge.

She was always interested in birds of prey and Dan took on Julia as an apprentice trainer, a process that requires two full hunting seasons in order to obtain her falconry licence. Dan, a former Canadian Forces specialist, said:

"Julia latched onto to the training like a Harris Hawk".

Although Festival performances are two or three times a week (from April 16 to Oct. 30), Clara and Barb spend most of their time patrolling landfill sites. Under contract, Dan said he can't name the area landfill sites where Julia and the birds work, but they are busy.

Julia said the gulls recognize her truck now and begin to disperse immediately upon her arrival. However, the food source is so tempting the gulls return quickly. Julia releases the birds and the gulls scatter again. She said occasionally Clara and Barb kill a gull, but generally the fright factor is enough.

Dan explained it is impossible to eliminate the gulls at landfill sites but keeping them away from the working areas allows heavy machinery operators to see what they are doing. "Otherwise, the hundreds of gulls looking for food in front of the machinery

creates a dangerous and unproductive environment for the operators," he added.

Dan's company also deals with all kinds of other pests such as raccoons but those contracts don't involve birds of prey. The company has also done international work in the United States, Galapagos Islands and Thailand.

Dan mainly uses Harris Hawks, Gyr Hawks, Peregrines, Saker Falcons, Merlins and Bald Eagles for pest control from the air. Each bird of prey species has specific talents for scaring off nuisance birds such as Ring-billed gulls, Herring gulls, crows and turkey vultures.

Dan's birds wear transmitters in case they get lost and fail to return to their trainers.

One of the strangest contracts Dan has taken on was the wedding

of two falconers who wanted to have their wedding rings delivered to the alter by a bird of prey. Dan trained the bird and it performed perfectly.

It would seem all's well that ends well when it comes to birds of prey.