

A DIFFERENT DIMENSION

An Interview With The Venice Beach Freakshow

Conducted by Gabrielle Faust for *Gothic Beauty Magazine* ©2014

“I am not a man I am dynamite.” — Friedrich Nietzsche

From sword swallows to two-headed animals of all shapes and sizes, humanity’s fascination with extreme deviations from the drone of its everyday existence has recently become an integral part of modern society and media. Today television series such as the “Freakshow” on AMCTV, which is based around the childhood dream of former music producer Todd Ray to build one of the most successful freakshows in America, have opened the doors to a far wider demographic, inviting them into the tight-knit family to show its unique inner workings. Now in their second season “Freakshow” has cultivated a captive audience, not only for the terrifying stunts artists such as Asia Ray and Morgue present each week, but also for the, at times, intimate drama that unfolds from the competition to be the “best in the world” at what they do.

Todd Ray remembers the first time he experienced a true freakshow and how it instantly captured his heart. “When I was about 12 year old, I went to a carnival in Charlotte, N.C. and there, in the middle of the midway, was the first real sideshow I had ever seen,” he said. “There was a huge banner line with amazing pictorial banners that showed all types of unusual people and performers. One said, ‘SEE the Sword Swallower’. Another said, ‘Human Oddities from Around the World’. And then there was the banner that said, ‘MASTER MAGICIAN’ and that one got me inside. I paid my dollar and entered the tent. What I experienced that day has become the lifeblood of the ‘Freakshow’. It felt like I had entered another dimension and I didn’t want to leave.”

As to what it was for him, initially, as well as his patrons, that inspires crowds to see such wonders, he explained, “It’s all because of curiosity. We would still be apes if it wasn’t for curiosity. It’s that same force that drives us to SEE what’s INSIDE. We love to witness what we never knew existed. It lets us know that, in fact, there are no boundaries.”

Many freakshow and sideshow performers find themselves drawn into the mysterious and colorful world at an early age. For Asia Ray, daughter of Todd Ray and a performer-artist, she was first introduced to mesmerizing experience when Todd opened the Venice Beach Freakshow when she was just thirteen. By the time she was a freshman in high school Asia had begun to work at the establishment alongside her father.

“While everyone was partying I was learning to eat fire,” she said. “It allowed me to meet all sorts of people I probably wouldn’t have met otherwise. This allowed me to better my understanding of what it is to be an individual and to be one’s self. Plus, being around so many extreme individuals made me realize that there is more than just the trend of the moment or what designer you are wearing.”

For Morgue, his journey to becoming an “extreme stunt artist” began far earlier with intense childhood phobias, which he forced himself to overcome.

“I have been performing since I was less than five years old,” he said. “I have been performing dangerous stunts professionally for the last six years. I used to have an intense phobia of needles. It was so bad that I would pass out after receiving a vaccination. As a teenager I began piercing myself with hypodermic needles everyday to overcome this fear. I pierced through my flesh, through the center of my bicep muscle and I even pierced completely through the center of both the palms of my hands as a metaphor for crucifixion, *my blood will set me free*. This began a chain of events that inspired me to overcome and push my body further and further.”

When asked what defines a true “extreme stunt artist”, Morgue replied, “I push the body to its very limits. I perform stunts that are extremely dangerous and could very well result in my death. It requires an immense amount of practice, dedication and knowledge of the human anatomy to pull off successfully. I am completely self-taught. What does art have to do with it? The stunts that I perform represent a part of my subjective experience, they reflect something important to me. For example, while lying on a bed of almost one thousand razor blades I shattered a mirror across my chest. This represented a metaphorical suicide, destroying a part of myself that I did not agree with, particularly my Christian upbringing. I received a large laceration across my wrist from one of the razor blades while attempting this act. I almost died.”

Morgue isn't the only artist, however, at the Venice Beach Freakshow that pushes the limits of mind-over-matter when it comes to performing extreme stunts. Asia Ray has demonstrated her own prowess over the years as she continues to explore the dangerous boundaries of her craft.

“I've had over 250,000 volts of electricity go through my body, have swallowed swords that could easily cut my esophagus and let me bleed to death, walked up a ladder of extremely sharp machetes barefoot balancing enough to not fall into a plethora of blades,” she remarked. “I have done a few deadly stunts in my young life to say the least. But of course I always continue to push it further. I don't only look at the physical dangers though. I like to perform and also share something more with my audience. I like to share something I've gone through or something I believe in through my performances. It's more than just ‘Ta da!’.”

At times, though, a stunt can prove too dangerous for Todd to allow on stage and as the owner and self-proclaimed “ringmaster” of the Venice Beach Freakshow, there have been times when he has had to urge on the side of caution.

Todd recounted, “Zamora the Torture King came to me and said he wanted to walk on metal plates heated to over 1500 degrees (the temperature that metal begins to liquefy). He told me he really wanted to walk on hot lava, but this was as close as he could produce at the Freakshow. Of course, I wanted to see him accomplish it, but my real fear for him was that the bottom of his feet were going to melt to the bone. In the end, he showed an amazing level of mind over matter and did it with no damage to the bottom of his feet.”

He continued, “There are a few other things that people want to do that I want to see, but I am

not sure it can happen safely. Andrew S. and Zamora have been talking about trying to stick a sword through the center of their body from their back through their stomach. It has to safely pass between all the organs in the body and the risk to their life is insane! It has only been done by one man in history. His name was Mirin Dajo. Then there's a friend of mine who is into body modification and she wants to cut some of her fingers off. She has told me that this is the body image she has always seen inside. In her case, I have just tried to get her to weigh the pros and the cons. I definitely don't feel comfortable when someone wants to cut their fingers off, but I did ask to receive the amputated fingers for the museum (if she does it)."

To the outside spectator it would appear, at times, that the "freaks" performing in shows such as the Venice Beach Freakshow possess a confidence and pride that many so-called "normal" people strive every day to achieve, yet never quite obtain. I asked Todd what he believed it was about his performers, and others around the world, that give them that beautiful air of power that lets them command the stage before captive audiences.

"With Larry the Wolf Boy, he was born covered with hair like a werewolf," Todd said. "He has had a lifetime of people staring, pointing, questioning, asking, 'Is it real?', etc. He has never been a part of the 'normal' world. Like all of us at the Freakshow, he knows from experience that that idea is an illusion. Jessa the Bearded Lady often has to deal with men saying things like, 'That's not a woman, that's a man in a dress!' I have to remind them that not only is she a real woman with feelings, she is a real lady with a beard."

He went on to say, "Believe me, embracing their uniqueness didn't come without a price from the 'normal' world. This is another reason that the Freakshow exists—to break that spell of conformity. To claim that 'normal' is dead. It's really a simple idea to realize that our differences are what make us beautiful and unique. When we try to be like others, we feel incomplete and ugly. When we accept ourselves for who we are, and not who others want us to be, we become a Freak—one of a kind, a Living Wonder—and the personal power that is released is amazing and freeing."

Todd is constantly looking to expand his show and searches the globe for the most extraordinary creatures, both human and otherwise, to become part of his world of exotic curiosities. But of all of the freaks he dreams of the most, there is a particular one in mind.

"Well, as you know, I have the Guinness World Record for having the largest collection of living two-headed animals in history," he said proudly. "I have a two-headed chicken, a two-headed pig, two-headed sea horses, two-headed turtles, two-headed lizards, two-headed snakes and even a two-headed cat (Itty and Bitty the Two-Headed Kitty). But the one two-headed animal I have been looking for forever is a two-headed pit bull. I would love to stand in front of the Freakshow with a two-headed pit bull on a chain!"

In the end, however, the concept of the great American freakshow is a platform for change, for forward-thinking concepts, and the desire to dismantle the preconceptions and societal conditioning that holds so much of humanity back from achieving their full potential.

"I want to see many changes in this world," Asia remarked. "Wanting to share my ideas with my

audience and hoping to help them create their own is what I like. I continue to become more and more open minded, free, and knowledgeable and I want to share that with everyone.”

“It is high time that people wake up and tell fear to fuck off,” Morgue added passionately. “People need to stop taking the path of least resistant and start becoming what they are meant to be. Most people live life by seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. What a dull and meaningless life. People should strive to actualize their potential, to become the best version of themselves that they can be, no matter what it may take.”

Todd Ray noted the importance, though, of truly special aspect of being one of the few in the world to be part of a freakshow. “We are all family. We do 20 shows a day together and it can be tough, but we all share a passion for the Freakshow and what it represents. As far as myself, my days and nights are filled with searching the world for strange creatures, unusual artifacts and amazing people. I literally don’t stop. Even before I go to sleep, I go outside and look up at the stars just to remind myself that this world we live in is such an amazing mystery.”

Todd Ray concluded, “Keep this in mind, you may think you’ve Googled it all, but there are things inside the ‘Freakshow’ that Google has never seen and *National Geographic* doesn’t know about. The world is full of mysteries within mysteries and I will continue to uncover them so you can SEE INSIDE what most will never see in their life. So when your world feels dusty and boring, damp and disgusting, come see us. Once you walk through those curtains, "normal" will no longer exist.”

“Freakshow” airs on AMCTV. Episodes can also be found on iTunes, Amazon, Netflix, Google Play, and Xbox. For more information visit www.facebook.com/venicebeachfreakshow.