

Storyteller takes show Cu'Fu? on road after October performances

By Greg Burliuk
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THREE-AND-A-HALF YEARS AGO, Charly Chiarelli thought he'd have fun doing this one-off performance about life in his Sicilian family's household while growing up in Hamilton. More than 125 performances later, Cu'Fu? has become a musical play that keeps Chiarelli so busy he's taken a year's leave of absence from his full-time job as a social worker with the Ministry of Health.

He will perform Cu'Fu? the first four Sundays in October at Theatre 5, and then in November, takes it to the Vancouver Storytelling Festival for three performances. After that, it's on to the Artword Theatre in Toronto where he will perform five days a week for five weeks.

It was at Artword that Cu'Fu? was first performed.

"I was one of the original founders of the Toronto International Storytelling Festival and they wanted me to do something for it, so someone suggested I put together some of the stories I had told about my family," says Chiarelli.

"Then someone suggested I write it down as a play and with the help of several members of the local theatre community that's what I did. Even now I'm fine tuning it constantly."

The play is a series of hilarious and touching vignettes about his Sicilian parents and their struggle to make sense of the New World, as well as stories about Chiarelli's youth in the '50s and '60s. Interspersed between the stories are traditional Italian and blues songs played by Chiarelli on the harmonica.

Cu'Fu? has been so popular with both Italian and non-Italian audiences that Chiarelli has played it in a lot of different venues: from the International Storytelling Festival in the Yukon to Canada Day in Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square; and from Edmonton's May Day Festival to a swing through the northern Ontario cities of Sudbury, Thunder Bay and Kirkland Lake.

"I change it according to my audiences," says Chiarelli. "It'll be different when I do it for high school students than when it's done for seniors.

"For people who are Italian, it often opens the floodgates of their memories. I feel great when I hear that."

Soon the play may even go overseas.

"It's been translated into Italian by a Queen's professor, Donato Santeramo," says Chiarelli. "Sicilian is a different language than Italian so we have to be careful to leave bits of Sicilian and English in the Italian version.

"I think it'll work over there because Italy, like Canada, is becoming a country of immigrants."

Currently Chiarelli is also working on a new play called Mangia Cake, about the experiences he and his wife and children had when they lived in Italy for a year.

NOT JUST FUNNY STUFF

"My mother never learned how to speak English so she couldn't talk to her grandchildren," says Chiarelli. "I thought this would be the easiest way for my kids to learn Italian and I thought I could be a blues musician.

"It's not just funny stuff, either. Our trip was delayed for eight months because I got cancer and my wife had to have brain surgery. And when we did go I had to have cancer treatments in Italy.

"Everything's fine now though."

So fine in fact, Chiarelli manages to find time to keep his musical chops honed as part of the musical group Beats Working that performs every Tuesday night at Brandees.