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SHOWCASE

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I Let's get into it.



SEND IN OUR CLOWN

Jimmy Slonina comes 'full Cirque-le' by returning home to get laughs in 'Kooza'

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SCOTT STEWART-SUN-SIMES

A CLASS CLOWN

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL | Slonina's comedic talent back on display for Chicago audiences

BY MARY HOULIHAN

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Laughter is the first sound you hear pouring out of the Grand Chapiteau. It's the clowns, always the clowns that get things started at Cirque du Soleil.

In "Kooza," the show currently at home in the United Center parking lot, the trio of fumbling tricksters includes hometown boy Jimmy Slonina. Yes, the former artistic director of Defiant Theatre and star of several Redmoon Theater productions has finally run away and joined the circus.

"This is what I've wanted to do — to perform in front of people and make them laugh — since I was a kid," Slonina said. "It's exciting and exhilarating every time I step out there."

Slonina joined the show two months ago. Before that he had been working in (former Cirque artistic director)

Franco Dragone's Las Vegas show "Le Reve," a big aquatic spectacle that involved swimming and entrances from under water. It was fun, but Cirque was something he had long dreamed about.

Slonina's style of clowning is a perfect fit for "Kooza," which is all about old-fashioned circus staples — clowns and acrobatics —

but always with that Cirque touch. In past shows, Cirque often employed a Russian style of clowning — very sad, very slow and very beautiful in its own way. But in "Kooza," the shift in the clown aesthetic to a more traditional clowning style appealed to Slonina.

"I'm more bent toward the high-energy stuff, the wackiness," Slonina, 35, said, during a recent backstage conversation.

The laugh-inducing "Kooza" trio — a king and his two court jesters — are the thread that runs between the show's various acts. They provide a lot of slapstick, a little mime and tons of simple fun.

And as always, before the show begins, there is hilarious audience interaction as Slonina's easily distracted jester, dressed in red overalls, makes clown passes at women in the crowd and gets himself into comical situations.

"Jimmy is just plain funny," said Redmoon artistic director Jim Lasko. "He has an adventurous mind, and it's great to see he's the same guy still doing his thing really well."

Slonina grew up in Garfield Ridge on Chicago's Southwest Side. He attended St. Laurence High School in Burbank, where he got the acting bug (the late comic actor John Ritter was

an early influence). He went on to study acting at the University of Illinois, where he credits movement teacher Robin McFarquhar with helping him hone his physical theater style.

"I can thank him for pretty much all the success I've had in my career," Slonina said. "He taught me more than just movement; he taught me discipline."

Returning to Chicago to start his career was a no-brainer.

"Chicago theater was my graduate school," Slonina said. "From an actor's standpoint, from a technical standpoint, from a business standpoint, everything you want to learn about theater, Chicago can teach you."

In 1996, Slonina joined the now-defunct Defiant Theatre, a company known for infusing physical theater and stage combat into its productions. In 2001, he became artistic director while also working on shows at Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Strawdog Theatre and the Mid-night Circus.

But it was at Redmoon where Slonina turned heads with his sadly comedic take on Kostya in "Seagull," the company's movement-based adaptation of Anton Chekhov's play, for which he won a Jeff Citation. It was a strange and beautiful production, and Slonina's performance was key to its success.

"He's a great collaborator," Lasko said. "He took Kostya's angst and gave it a new perspective."

"Kooza" was already up and running when Slonina came on board. He says he isn't sad he missed the months and months of discovery and creation (something he experienced with "Le Reve") that it took to create the "Kooza" clown routines.

"Getting into it day in and day out and fine-tuning is more my speed," Slonina said. "I did my homework, and two very smart, very generous, very funny guys [fellow clowns Gordon Knight and Christian Fitzharris] had my back."

Slonina, accompanied by his wife, artist Robin Barcus, will continue to travel around the country with "Kooza" through 2009. And while many may now define him by his clowning, Slonina prefers to be categorized as "an actor."

"Being a clown is still acting: putting on a character that's not me in a world that's not normal and doing things I probably wouldn't do elsewhere," Slonina said. "And when you get laughs, that makes it all even better. I think I've really landed in a good place."

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Jimmy Slonina answered the call when Cirque du Soleil's "Kooza" needed a new clown. | SCOTT STEWART/SUN-TIMES

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