

SPRING A&E GUIDE

Tyler Smith aims to shock and awe

Local sideshow performer pushes boundaries, appreciates audiences' disgust and amazement at taboo art

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Local artist and performer Tyler Smith really didn't know what he was getting into the first time he agreed to participate in a sideshow performance in Charlotte.

He'd had some interest, and his aunt had introduced him to the now-disbanded performance troupe Kabarett Vulgare, where other performers asked him to be their human pincushion.

"I kind of got thrown into it, honestly," Smith, 20, says. "One of the other performers, Amy, asked me if I was interested in becoming their human pincushion for a Valentine's day show they were doing. Basically, she was just going to stick needles in my chest in the shape of a heart and run a red ribbon through it and that was supposed to be it."

That performance got canceled during last year's bitter snow and ice storm, but Smith soon got his chance to do another show some weeks later.

"I expected whatever to happen to happen," he recalls. "It was fun. It was a very new experience to have."

And Smith says the pins didn't really cause him too much pain.

"The way we did it was in a sort of ritual, trance act, so it was a very meditative state I was in," he says. "It didn't really hurt all that bad, because I was more focused on meditating and deep breathing. I didn't really focus on the pain."

Smith's introduction to the "freak show" had begun. He tried other acts, like the human blockhead — hammering a screw, nail or other item into his nasal cavity. He's also practiced eating and breathing fire, eating glass, walking on broken glass and is now working toward perfecting sword swallowing.

His human blockhead performance recently got a bit of attention and gained him some new social media followers. In December, FX's "American Horror Story" shared his short Instagram video featuring the act in their "We Are All Freaks" Freak of the Day feature.

"I checked the message they sent me because at first I didn't believe it," Smith says. "When I saw that it really was from them, telling me I had been chosen to be featured, I was super excited. I still kind of couldn't believe it."

Smith says he really enjoys the dramatic components of sideshow performance. It's intriguing, he says, to watch audience members recoil in disgust while at the same time leaning in in amazement.

"Honestly, they don't want to watch, but they also can't look away. It's like a train wreck," he says. "It definitely drives me to push it even further and see how much further I can gross people out and freak them out."

Body modification, freak shows and sideshow acts, along with other oddities of the weird and curious, have engaged audiences for millennia. Smith says some might see it as a "dying art," but it still has staying power and the ability to draw in new and curious onlookers.

"It's just the taboo of it, me being able to do something that a normal person wouldn't do," he says.

And Smith includes his audiences in his acts, too — delivering even more shock and awe.

In one act, what Smith calls "Mental Floss," he takes a long, flexible PVC tube and runs it through his nose and out of his mouth. Next, he asks an audience member to use the tube as a straw, drinking a cocktail through his head. In another act, audience members use a staple gun to staple dollar bills to Smith's body.

"I include them in the act," he says. "They are helping me do this really disgusting, really weird thing. It draws people up to the stage and makes them want to be a part of it."

Audiences do, occasionally, draw the line.

"When I ask them to pull a screwdriver from my head [during the human blockhead act], that's pushing it too much," Smith relates.

Smith is still new to the biz. He's teaching himself new acts and looking toward booking performances soon at local venues. He's already performed some acts at Chaser's, Petra's and other venues. He hopes he'll soon be able to book acts at Snug Harbor or Scorpio.

Smith, who is himself gay, says the gay community has been particularly fond patrons of the taboo art: "A lot of the gay community are already so open with being different and being creative. A lot of my influences come from there."

Smith says he's also working to create a new performance troupe he's calling the Cabaret of Curiosities. A few friends are already on board and he hopes he can do auditions for other performers soon.

Until it all pulls together, Smith plans to continue training and trying new acts.

"I've only been doing this a little over a year now," he says. "Whenever I do new acts, it's definitely a little bit scary."

But it's something he enjoys immensely, and the audiences do, too.

"They all love it," he says. ::

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