

Charly Chiarelli presents *Cu'Fu?*, a personal one-man show

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KINGSTON THIS WEEK

Can there be anyone left in Kingston who hasn't heard of *Cu'Fu?*, Charly Chiarelli's one-man show that blends storytelling with sweet harmonica blues?

If there is, they don't know what they're missing. Fortunately, Kingstonians have a handful of opportunities to catch the show during October. Chiarelli is performing the show at Theatre 5 for a month of Sundays — at 8 pm, Oct. 10, 17 and 24.

Sabbatical from his day job

The gig is part of a sabbatical Chiarelli is taking from his day job as a senior policy analyst with the Ministry of Health. During his year off, Chiarelli will be touring the immensely popular *Cu'Fu?* (the title is Sicilian for "who did it?") across Canada and possibly to the United States; but he's not resting on his laurels. He is already writing his next one-man show, among other projects.

"I'm going in four major directions," he says of his leave. "One as a musician, the other as a storyteller with a classical chamber orchestra, another as a performer presenting *Cu'Fu?*, and then I'm writing this other show. That's why I need the year off."

Creative career snowballing

The snowball effect his creative career is enjoying began with the success of *Cu'Fu?*, the enchanting and poignant story of Chiarelli's youth. He emigrated to Canada with his parents when quite young; the stories in *Cu'Fu?* relate what it was like growing up Sicilian in urban Hamilton.

"The show was originally written for the Queen Street West art community [in Toronto] at the Artwood Theatre," Chiarelli explains. "I thought it would be one performance only." Instead, years after his initial success with that one performance, Chiarelli is returning to the revamped space. "It was once a little warehouse space and they were turning away 100 people a night after the single event," he recalls.

What's the appeal?

What is it that draws people to see *Cu'Fu?*, sometimes many times over? Chiarelli can only speculate on what it is about the show that speaks to its audiences.

"I think people see it as a combination of audacity and courage," he muses, "to do something so personal — and as they watch, people wonder how far I'm going to go. I put everybody in the [hospital] room with my father [at the beginning], and they realize there's a reason."

"The death of people of that generation is a reality that everyone can relate to — because everybody is an immigrant. They're relating in their own lives to what's going on."

Celebration of life

Although *Cu'Fu?* does deal with death, it is far more a celebration of life. Chiarelli's passionate delight in his own storytelling effortlessly carries audiences into each scene, whether he's telling of the time he proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that Sicilians can indeed grow figs in Canadian backyards, relating how he smuggled a girlfriend into his bedroom after the prom, only to have to hatch an elaborate scheme to "smuggle" her out again the next morning, or describing his father's reaction to the new hi-fi system or his mother's increasingly dreamy dishwashing as he and his friends indulge in me "mario lanza" before a rock concert.

But Chiarelli believes there's another reason people respond so positively to his show.

"I'm a historian," he points out. "I'm delighted to be reminding people of pin boys and turntables and the first escalators. It occurs to me that an audience is respond-

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ing first of all because I'm reminding them how important memories are. We live in a society that's so fast and so forward, and I remind them to slow down."

Now writing new piece

Fans of *Cu'Fu?* can look forward to Chiarelli's continuing adventures in the piece he's now writing, entitled *Mangiacake*. With all the input he received while writing *Cu'Fu?*, Chiarelli feels certain he has grown as a writer. "Because of that," he says, "I've learned, now I have a piece [*Cu'Fu?*] that writers appreciate, musicians appreciate, actors appreciate — and now as I write *Mangiacake*, I need less input, because I feel more confident, on the technical side.

"On the artistic side, I'm quite paranoid — how will I ever match *Cu'Fu?* I think about it all the time — about where it needs to go. I want to avoid saying something that's already been said."

Other projects

There seems little fear of that. If anything, Chiarelli is pushing the envelope, finding newer, fresher ways to tell the stories people want to hear. Another of his projects is *The Birds Beyond*, a collaboration with John Burge; Chiarelli wrote the story for the Kingston Symphony and Burge scored it. Chiarelli hopes to tour with *The Birds Beyond* as well as *Cu'Fu?* He also performs every Tuesday night at Brandegee with David Hurley's Beats Workin' band, and has provided the harmonica licks for "about 50 albums" recorded in the Westport studios.

Actor, storyteller, musician, writer — Chiarelli is a bundle of creative energy, but he takes none of it for granted.

"In some ways, I regret I've been a bureaucrat all my life," he says. "But it's been a good living and the life of show business is rife with ups and downs. I'm just trying to make a go of it — but even if I don't and return to work next June, I still have lots of opportunities for performances — holidays, weekends — and a change is as good as a rest."

Magnet for stories

People have pointed out that Chiarelli will never be short of material, either.

"Somebody said that I'm a magnet for stories," he remembers. "But I don't think that's it — I seem to take the path less trodden, and that's where the stories are. In taking this path, you find interesting realities — the stories."

But having the stories is only half the work. Once you've gathered them, then you have to tell them.

"I'm not a trained actor," Chiarelli confesses. "I'm typically immigrant-insecure about the arts. It took me a long time to realize that things that were nurtured in me on that verandah in Hamilton — storytelling — defined me as an artist. That was performance art — but I always thought it was a kitchen table or the drunken basement jam session. I never thought I'd be doing this."