

Lover of old-time radio revives serial form at Bryant-Lake Bowl

By Chris Hewitt

chewitt@pioneerpress.com

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Voice-over artist Eric Webster, center, and the cast perform an episode of "Shade's Brigade," an old-time radio show in six installments at Bryant Lake Bowl in Minneapolis. (Photo courtesy of Shade's Brigade)

The technology may have changed -- it's an iPod now instead of a transistor radio -- but actor and writer Eric Webster still lulls himself to sleep the way he did when he was a kid: listening to old-time radio.

In addition to being a good way to wind down, that pastime has turned into "Shade's Brigade," a live radio show and theater hybrid that is broken up into six "episodes," now being performed at Minneapolis' Bryant-Lake Bowl.

Webster, a former emcee for the St. Paul Saints, is joined in performing "Shade's Brigade" by his wife, Shanan Custer, along with Dave Gangler and Lee Adams, the Saints' current emcee.

"It all started at the Pioneer Place Theatre in St. Cloud.



Shanan Custer performs during an episode of "Shade's Brigade." (Courtesy photo)

They were doing a show with a radio station, and they contacted me because I'd worked there, and they knew I was into old-time radio," said Webster, 49, a native of Robbinsdale. "I told them, 'It just so happens I've been working on an old-time radio show for, I don't know, my whole life.' "

That show is "Shade's Brigade," and it combines Webster's love of radio serials -- especially the 1930s and '40s show "I Love a Mystery" -- with his love of live performance. He plays Jack Shade, an adventurer who leads a team of mercenaries in performing clandestine operations for the U.S. government on the eve of World War II.

At the beginning of each performance, Webster invites listeners to close their eyes to duplicate the experience of listening to a radio serial.

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"I'll look out into the audience and find people with their eyes shut, sometimes for the whole show. Or they'll come once and keep their eyes open, but come back to keep their eyes shut," said Webster, who also performs in "The Smothers Brothers

Grimm" through early May at Bryant-Lake Bowl. "We make sure it's fun to watch, but it's a completely different animal when you close your eyes and the theater of the mind takes over."

Kim Herndon, a Lino Lakes accountant who does Webster's taxes, is a fan of the show who tends to keep her eyes open.

"The story sucks you in. There's this mystery happening, and you really want to be sure your favorite characters are going to survive, so you're kind of on the edge of your seat. But, at the same time, there are little bits of comedy, where the actors make mistakes and just roll with it," Herndon said.

Rolling with it is definitely part of the deal. When a performer plays two characters who are having a conversation with each other, almost inevitably the voices get mixed up.

Another source of confusion? Sound effects. Webster likes to keep 'em low-tech: "I'm always going through Fleet Farm and banging on things to see what noise they make. I don't know what anything in Fleet Farm is really for, but I can tell you rain gutters make a great thunder sound.



Eric Webster, left, and Lee Adams during a performance of "Shade's Brigade." (Courtesy photo)

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But "low-tech" is not foolproof.

There was, for instance, the time a cast member was supposed to pop three balloons in quick succession to approximate the sound of a gun being fired three times. Unfortunately, the balloons had not been completely filled, so the actor had to swat at them several times before they exploded, and even when they did, it was with a poof, not a bang.

"We all started to laugh because it sounded terrible. But all of us are good improvisers: Shanan did many years at Dudley Riggs, and Lee runs the Mystery Cafe (a murder mystery dinner theater)," Webster said. "So we broke up, but we tried not to laugh into the mikes, and then I said, 'So, instead of firing the gun, I decided to kick the door in.' "

Those effects are a big part of the fun, said Steve Siegel, Herndon's husband.

"There's a character who is supposed to have not eaten in a long time, and a little girl gives him an apple and he eats this whole apple in, like, 15 seconds," Siegel said. "It was funny to watch him get that sound effect because he's taking a bite, and before he can chew that, he has half a dozen bites in his mouth at once."

The cast has performed the episodes of "Shade's Brigade" at several venues, but fans often return to see how the show evolves. Herndon said it's never a problem to pick up the story in the middle, because Webster does a detailed synopsis at the beginning of each performance (or you can listen to previous episodes at shadesbrigade.com).

The ability to improvise is what makes "Shade's Brigade" fun, said Adams, who, in addition to his St. Paul Saints work and the Mystery Cafe, is an actor and voice-over artist.

"It's my favorite gig," Adams said. "We have a blast with each other, doing the show. As a comedic actor, it's fun because you don't need to spend hours and hours committing it to memory. You're not always thinking ahead to your next clue, so that frees you up to be in the moment and see what happens."

Being part of the Saints entertainment team also feeds into "Shade's Brigade," according to Adams.

"You assume you know how to use a microphone, but this is different," Adams said. "If your voice gets tired, for instance, there's a lot I've picked up from the Saints job about how you can use your voice smarter and work with the microphone."

"Shade's Brigade" isn't a money-maker, but it provides different kinds of satisfaction, Webster said. Take, for instance, a performance in St. Cloud last winter, when he began to play the show's opening theme song on a melodica.

"The entire audience, 140 people I think we had, starts to hum along. I was so shocked, I stopped, and they all finished the theme. All the actors were looking at each other with these big smiles on our faces," said Webster, who is using that moment as motivation to write a second adventure for Shade and crew.

"I realized then that I've hit on something people like and that is fun and relatively easy for me to do," Webster said. "I don't ever see this making money, and I know this is going to sound so 'Wanker Actor,' but: That moment was everything. That's really what this is all about."

Chris Hewitt can be reached at 651-228-5552. Follow him on twitter.com/ChrisHMovie.

IF YOU GO

What: "Shade's Brigade" (third episode)

When: 7 p.m. Sunday, April 19 (also May 17, June 21 and July 26)

Where: Bryant-Lake Bowl Theater, 810 W. Lake St., Mpls.

Tickets: \$12-\$10, bryantlakebowl.com



"Shade's Brigade" is an old-time radio show that is being performed live, in six installments, at Bryant-Lake Bowl in Minneapolis. (Courtesy photo)