

Public eye

Nicole Dunbar, "thirtyish"

North and Sheffield Avenues

I see you're wearing a VanderCook College of Music sweatshirt. Are you a student there?

I worked there as Director of Development. I was in charge of fundraising and special events. **I'm not familiar with the school.** It's a school that educates potential music educators, so everyone that goes there wants to be a band director or elementary music educator.

How's your shopping going?

I did a lot of my Christmas shopping. I went to Wal-Mart yesterday and, luckily, didn't get trampled... It wasn't what I expected—the toy selection wasn't that good.



Are you going out of town for the holidays?

I'm going to Florida. I'm from Chicago, but a lot of my family's now in Florida. The only thing I dislike about the season is the mad rush on Christmas Eve to put up all the decorations. In Florida, they put Christmas lights on palm trees, which is very odd. They do all the decorations the same, except everything's on palm trees and it's hot and people are in flip-flops and shorts. It's very weird. **Santa hats don't really pair well with cabana gear and white shoes, huh?**

Yeah, but they don't know any better. I don't know if they were wearing white shoes. I think the fashion rules still apply down there: No white after Memorial Day. —JM

Cats on parade

You can't teach an old dog new tricks, but what about a stray cat? By **Kate Rockwood**

ME-OW! Yuri Kuklachev and his Moscow Cats Theatre have got some upcoming shows on their hands.



As mind-boggling as it is to watch Marusya the cat do a "paw-stand" on the palm of the Moscow Cats Theatre's ringleader, Yuri Kuklachev, the showstopper has got some stiff competition from the troupe's 120 cats and four dogs.

Ksusha, a tan and brown cat, performs a "tightrope" routine by hooking his front arms over two parallel poles and pulling himself along; Kat travels along the poles by balancing atop a massive, moving disco ball; Lastachka rides a miniature bicycle; while Tamara sits atop a rocking horse, holding the reins with its front paws. Most kitties in this show have a "signature trick," according to Kuklachev, who spoke to us through a translator, "though I do tend to have at least two cats who can perform the same trick, in case one doesn't want to perform."

The Moscow Cats Theatre troupe—made up of 30 cats and one lone pooch—is touring the U.S. and had its

Chicago premiere on December 10, but will return December 26 to 30 to perform *Cats from Outer Space* again. "The show is about magical creatures that come from above and a lonely clown that tries to befriend them," Kuklachev says. "The dog keeps the cats in line during the performance, but of course this is just a part of the show."

The Moscow Cats Theatre was formed when Kuklachev, then working as a clown in the Russian National Circus, encountered a hungry stray cat doing somersaults for scraps in the street. Realizing that cats might be the element he needed to create a unique show, Kuklachev adopted the stray. "The very first trick was the cat in the pot," Kuklachev says. "I came home one day and couldn't find my cat anywhere. Finally I found her sleeping in a cooking pot and when I tried taking her out she would jump right back in."

After a few years of bringing home strays, Kuklachev began breeding the most playful and talented cats. "I

observe the kitties from birth and play with them to see what their natural talent is, then base my tricks around their likes," says Kuklachev, who prefers to think of the 40 focused minutes he spends weekly with each cat as playing rather than training. "The trick is not to run through the routines constantly, so that every time they are onstage it seems like playing," he says, though he also credits the success rate of onstage tricks to his mainly female cast members, who are "more alert and slightly smarter" than their brothers.

"The dog keeps the cats in line during the performance."

So far, the cats on tour have been met with the same fanfare their shows receive at home. "You'd expect the audience to be made up of mostly kids," according to tour manager Yanis Gelfman, "but really it's a 50-50 split of families and pet lovers." Indeed, what pet lover wouldn't want to see the show's finale: a cream-colored kitty decked out in full queen regalia, crown included. "With a lot of love and some little treats," Gelfman explains, "you can perform miracles."

Get in a furball frenzy with the Moscow Cats Theatre, December 26-30, in Skokie. See Around Town listings.



What Would Oprah Do?

Past quotes offer clues to how she'd weigh in on current events

Is giving gifts important?

"What I know now for sure is that a gift isn't a gift unless it has meaning. Just giving things to people, especially children, creates the expectation of more things."*

*From *O* magazine, December 2006