

Festival a time to embody those avatars

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Robert Gould, one of the producers for the Faerieworlds Festival, believes it won't be long before just about everyone has avatars — online fantasy manifestations of themselves.

Those who dress up and engage with the annual festival at Secret House Vineyards are a little ahead of the curve, creating real-life personas to complement the online relationships they have formed through Faerieworlds forums and private messaging.

“What’s really interesting is we’re living in a time where people can express their inner selves in a very direct way,” he said during a recent interview at his east Eugene home.

Gould cites war-craft video games and other environments featuring avatars as ways for people to express themselves in the virtual world. He said Faerieworlds offers an opportunity to do more with that idea.

“People are living those avatars, reaching inside themselves,” he said.

The annual festival — now a three-day event that starts today on the theme of “Good Faeries,” moves on Saturday to “Bad Faeries” and has a

family day Sunday — offers nonstop music of a mythical ilk. There also will be a vendor marketplace, meet-and-greet opportunities with authors and artists in the fantasy genre, and a chance to dress up as any imaginable creature in the faerie realm.

As in past years, a Saturday spiral dance ritual will serve to unite the crowd in a common experience, event partners said.

In 2000, Gould joined forces with Emilio and Kelly Miller-Lopez to produce their first faerie event after the couple had sent Gould a copy of an album by their band, Woodland. They sent the CDs out to artists who had inspired them.

The copy Gould got his hands on was forwarded to famous illustrator Brian Froud, whom Gould represented through a media and publishing company. This year, Gould moved to Eugene to work closer with his partners and to make their faerie endeavors a year-round pursuit.

The trio said they expect more than 10,000 people will attend this year's festival. And based on advanced ticket sales and online discussions, people will be coming from all over the world.

"It's the place they come to renew their spirit," Kelly Miller-Lopez said. "The web that has been woven is vast."

Recognizing that they are filling a unique niche, the three have begun to take the show on the road, producing similar events in different cities around the country while continuing to put on FaerieCon in Philadelphia.

A context to express magic

Seated at Gould's dining room table sipping tea, Kelly Miller-Lopez recounted with a girlish giggle how last year's spiral dance typified the manner of magic that comes from creating an impromptu world of faerie.

This time last year, an elaborately dressed man in blue body paint bemoaned the blackening sky and complained to Miller-Lopez that his makeup would run if the rain fell. Miller-Lopez said not to worry: She had

the same fear, but a voice told her the clouds would part.

Sure enough, when the time for the spiral dance came, the sun beamed down as if operated by some light man in the sky.

Also known as the Lunasa ritual, the dance and offering of food is performed in many ancient European cultures to implore the sun to stay for the rest of the harvest season.

As Kelly Miller-Lopez told the story, her husband did not go so far as to roll his eyes. But the self-described “spreadsheet” guy doesn’t delve into the fanciful, playful language his wife does when describing what they are trying to accomplish with the event.

All three producers said creating Faerieworlds is a dream come true, and they emphasized that their interpretation for the meaning of “faerie” or its place in modern society really does not matter. They simply are creating the context in which it’s OK for guests to express their magic.

“Our guests really are the show,” Gould said. “Eighty percent of the people come in costume, and 70-plus percent of them make their own. (That’s) a deep level of enrollment.”

They know the percentages, he said, because they survey guests. “We work really hard to understand our audience.”

From those surveys, they have found that exploring the faerie realm is not something people abandon when they become old enough write in cursive, wear a training bra, drive a car or vote. Disney, Emilio Lopez-Miller said, takes children to a certain point, but then the journey ends.

“We want to continue that for them,” he said, noting the largest group of ticket purchasers are women between the ages of 25 and 50.

Gould said that while dressing up is a big part of the festival, others feel just as comfortable coming in everyday clothes or just sporting some antlers or horns.

“Our culture expects you to just grow up,” Gould said. But faerie “is not a trend. It’s a lifestyle.”

Along with that fact, the three producers said they operate with core values of honoring the Earth and encouraging people to get in touch with their roots. But personally, they said they prefer to stay ideologically neutral in their production.

“Faerieworlds doesn’t have an agenda, but it does have values and expresses those values with every interaction with our guests,” Gould said.

Fun and fantasy with the Frouds

Once again, Brian and Wendy Froud will host the event, mingling with fans and giving out autographs. This year, celebrated faerie artists Amy Brown and Jessica Calbreth will share the spotlight with the Frouds.

Kelly Miller-Lopez, whose band Woodland plays the festival each year, said performing on stage gives musicians instant feedback. But authors and visual artists “perform” alone; their fans experience their work in some far off, usually private, place.

So authors relish the chance to interact with fans, whom she said often have deep emotional connections to the work.

For music, the 2008 bill is a combination of bands popular in the West Coast festival circuit — such as Kan’Nal, Zilla and Trillian Green — and acts working on gaining North American audiences.

The promoters said they hope the more familiar bands help draw attention to the European acts, some of whom have never played the West Coast.

The German-based Qntal blends electronica with traditional music. It used Brian Froud’s artwork to illustrate its latest CD, “Silver Swan.”

Estampie shares two members with Qntal, but focuses on the medieval dance and musical form it named itself after. Both groups have been gaining fans in Europe for more than 15 years and are expanding their

American audiences, promoters said.

Also new to the West Coast is Priscilla Hernandez, a Gothic singer-songwriter and illustrator who lives in Spain.

Hernandez will perform the two thematic elements from her New Age album of the year, "Ancient Shadows." On Good Faeries Night, she will perform "The Fairy," and on Bad Faeries night she will perform "The Ghost."

Generally speaking, the promoters looked for bands with a timeless quality that incorporate story and folklore or that would create the type of ambience and energy they are hoping to achieve.

"They are grounded in deep traditions," Gould said. "It's often Celtic, but also medieval.

"It's very sophisticated but at the same time very accessible. These are bridge builders" between the modern and ancient.

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