

# Solange De Santis

Australian Penis “Puppeteers” Would Have Made Barnum Proud

By Solange De Santis

Scene: Seaside Park, not far from Mountain Grove Cemetery, Bridgeport, Conn.

A reporter from Toronto walks up to the bronze statue of 19<sup>th</sup> century showman P.T. Barnum that has resided in Bridgeport, Conn. since his death in 1891. Barnum, producer of circuses, exhibits, sideshows and curiosities of all kinds, is seated, gazing out over Long Island Sound and, oddly enough, he nods.

Barnum: Hello, hello. Good of you to visit me. I long for news of the world of show business.

Reporter: Well, P.T., I've just been to see a show in Toronto that's going to New York soon called *Puppetry of the Penis*.

Barnum: What? What's that you say?

R: You're not going to believe it.

Barnum: Now, now, that was my line. I once exhibited something called the Fejee Mermaid, which was actually the dried-up head and hands of a monkey sewn to the body of a fish. Thousands came to see it. Not to mention Jumbo the elephant and Tom Thumb, World's Smallest Man.

R: Well, *Puppetry of the Penis* is two actual human beings, guys named Simon Morley and David Friend, whose nickname is Friendly. They come out in colorful capes, which they soon doff, and proceed to bend, twist and manipulate their not-so-private parts into various shapes. They call these things “installations” and the shapes resemble, oh, the Eiffel Tower, a hamburger, an Australian fruit bat, the Loch Ness monster.

Barnum: A monster!?

R: A small monster.

Barnum: Good God, this sounds positively obscene.

R: Actually, the show isn't obscene. It's not sexual at all. It's certainly for adults only, but after about ten minutes you get used to the nudity and it's just a couple of sculptors playing with clay. And the boys keep up a stream of humorous banter, mostly making fun of themselves. The audience is in stitches. I must say, as a woman, I understood Freud's concept of penis envy for the first time. What a neat toy to play with.

Barnum: So women attend these shows?

R: Oh yes, in fact the audience was about two-thirds women, mostly over the age of 35, I'd say.

Barnum: I'm not surprised. Women were my best customers, especially if they thought an exhibit was a bit risqué or flouted social convention. They would pretend to be shocked, then come back for more. But what about the police? Haven't these boys been hauled off to jail? Actually, I spent a bit of time in the hoosegow myself in connection with some of my activities.

R: I interviewed the boys the other day and they said that they have had a few run-ins with the law. Simon Morley said that in Sydney, where they were playing a pub, they were told they were breaking a law banning the touching of genitals in an establishment licensed to serve alcohol. “So that moved us into theaters, which can seat more people, anyway,” he said. The boys fully acknowledge that their behavior would get them arrested on the street outside the theater, but once you put them inside a theater and sell tickets, that's a different story.

Barnum: Brilliant! Surely, somewhere, they've been condemned by the clergy? That's always good for business.

R: Yes, Morley said that in Colchester, England, an evangelist criticized the show, but then the local bishop said that there was nothing wicked about the human body.

Barnum: And the show is opening in New York, you say?

R: Yes, on October second.

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Barnum: My museum in New York was a wild success. Big-city customers were as curious as any farmer. But surely the boys thought twice about opening their frivolous display, considering the terrible crisis the city is enduring?

R: They surely did, but noted that their Toronto shows continued to sell out. "We were going to cancel, then we thought that people are going to need to take their minds off the situation," said Morley. They also noted that America's leaders have asked people to resume their normal activities. Since they are entertainers, they decided to continue their work.

Barnum: A minute ago, did you say Sydney? These boys aren't American?

R: No, they're from Australia.

Barnum: So much the better. An act always plays better if it's from somewhere else – seems exotic. How did this all develop?

R: Both fellows said they started off simply doing what all men do out of curiosity -- purely for themselves and giggling, sometimes drunk, friends. Morley, who is currently 35, was working about eight years ago as a comedy promoter in Melbourne and was getting occasional bookings for his so-called "dick tricks" at "bachelorette" parties and pubs. I'm not sure what goes on down there in Melbourne, but he heard that a fellow named David Friend, who's now 32 and used to work as a computer programmer, was doing the same thing. Morley attempted to market his "installations" as a calendar, but that idea flopped – sorry, P.T. I'm trying to avoid puns. The two guys teamed up and premiered the current show at the Melbourne Comedy Festival in 1998, then took it on tour in Australia. They've built up a fairly elaborate story about what they do. Morley said a journalist once asked them if they were doing something like "genital origami," and they latched on to the phrase. "We knew it was shocking, it was something taboo. Half the joke was selling it as art," said Morley. They've actually produced a book of their "origami" and an introduction from the "grandmaster," who's actually a cop friend of theirs.

Barnum: I'm in awe. I couldn't have done it better myself. And they're actually making a living from this?

R: Well, last year, when they took the show to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, they were sleeping on floors. But then it was a hit in London and played the Montreal Comedy Festival and now they've got a couple of touring shows on the go.

Barnum: So how much did people pay in Toronto to see these fellows manipulate their willies?

R: \$40 per ticket, which included a half-hour show by British comedienne Wendy Vousden. Morley said they grossed about A\$1.5 million alone from the tour in Oz. P.T., are you all right?

Barnum: Arrrgh! I can't stand it. I'm insanely jealous!  
(The statue slowly begins to rotate.)

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