

# Growing Noble Fool company hosts two crowd pleasers this summer

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John Gawlik is a quiet man, with Hollywood good looks and a friendly salesman's smile. For the last two years he has been artistic director of the Noble Fool, the theatrical organization that performs at Pheasant Run Resort in St. Charles.

And what years they have been. Audience numbers are up. The production that just closed, "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change," was one of the theater's most successful yet, and Noble Fool will host two perennial crowd pleasers this summer, a revival of "Defending the Caveman" and a show from Chicago's famed Second City, "Pratfall of Civilization." And then there is the company's new theater program for young people, which is growing by leaps and bounds.

Gawlik took over at a time when things looked dark at Pheasant Run. The previous theatrical organization at Pheasant Run had gone bankrupt. To be fair, Pheasant Run didn't do them in. An unfavorable lease for a theater in the Chicago Loop did. Before that, while shows were artistically successful, ticket sales had not reached their potential.

Enter Noble Fool Theatricals, an organization created specifically for Pheasant Run. A little while later, Gawlik was named artistic director and almost immediately the box office experienced an up tick, and it has only gone up from there.

"It's been an incredibly fast two years," Gawlik says, "We have seen a 20 percent increase each year."

Even rising gas prices, a factor hurting other businesses, seems to be helping Noble Fool. Theater fans in the Fox Valley who might have driven all the way to Chicago for "dinner and a show" are opting to stay closer to home when presented with a high-quality alternative.

"Right now, we are poised to have our most successful year," Gawlik says. The audience numbers please Gawlik, but you can tell it is the growth of the Noble Fool Performing Arts Academy that really excites him.

"Last year we had 140 students," he says, "This year we have 550. It is just an explosion."

Education has always been important to the Wheaton-born and -raised Gawlik.

When Gawlik was in high school he made the long commute into Chicago every day to attend one of Chicago's A-list Catholic schools, the Jesuit-run St. Ignatius. For college he went to another well-regarded Jesuit institution, Marquette University in Milwaukee.

It was there, while pursuing his major in history and working at a local TV station, that he got bitten by the theater bug. Or more specifically, the comedy bug.

"I graduated from Marquette in 1994," Gawlik says, "And came back to Chicago to study at Second City. I also took classes at Improv Olympic and the Annoyance."

That trio of improv-based comedy theatres can take credit for nurturing many of today's top comic actors, including Amy Poehler, Steven Colbert and Steve Carell.

Gawlik performed in some improv comedy troupes. But for him improv was just the first step to a more serious acting career. His ability to play both comic and serious roles opened the door to roles at heavyweight Equity theaters like the Northlight Theatre in Skokie. And that led to Gawlik joining the ensemble at one of Chicago's rising, young, hip companies, the Gift Theater, a company that specializes in Chicago-style, deep-dish acting.

"Things just sort of evolved," Gawlik explains.

Gawlik's vision and willingness to work hard is evident in everything he does. The booming theater school has inspired Gawlik to grow the school even larger. "It's important to give back to the community," he says.

Gawlik is still planning the 2008-2009 season at Noble Fool. All he will say for sure is that it will contain a mix of serious and comic plays, some challenging, some more entertaining than challenging.

"We work hard to keep in touch with our community, the Fox Valley area," Gawlik says, "We have surveys and we talk to subscribers. We want to always know what shows they like and what they are excited about."

"In the next year I'd like to see us continue to evolve and continue to challenge ourselves and our audience," Gawlik says, "I love

taking out audiences through all these different styles. I want our audiences to feel they will always see something completely different on our stage."

And with Gawlik leading, it seems they always will.

Noble Fool is located at Pheasant Run Resort, 4051 Main St., St. Charles. "Defending the Caveman" runs July 28 - Aug. 3. The Second City's "Pratfall of Civilization" runs Aug. 8, 9, 15 and 22. For tickets or information on the Noble Fool Performing Arts Academy see [noblefool.org](http://noblefool.org).