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west 36 pages

Dinosaur fossils on the market page 9

photo Jason Lang

Travelling man

by Michael McCarthy
contributing writer

Despite the pouring rain, the lineup to get into the Rio Theatre on East Broadway at Commercial Drive stretches around the block. The marquee reads: Solo in South America, with William Jans. It's a cold Thursday night, so what kind of show is this that would draw such a huge crowd on an off night in the dead of winter? Inside the packed lobby, tables are jammed with photos and T-shirts for sale. Who the heck is William Jans and how can he draw up to 1,000 people to his performances where a major part of the advertising is word of mouth?

"I've been to every one of his shows," says a young lady in the packed lobby, buying a framed photo of Mt. Kailash, a holy mountain in Tibet.

"I've been to his Tibet and Burma shows and I can't wait to see this one on South America," says her boyfriend.

Jans' father Bill and mother Janet welcome people to the show and tell them to sign up for door prizes. "Come on in folks," says Bill Sr. "You'll catch your death of cold out there."

It's show time in the growing cult of William Jans, a photographer, filmmaker and storyteller. There is a pervasive sense of excitement in the air that matches the buttery smell of hot popcorn. It may be miserable weather in Vancouver, but wild William Jans is about to take his growing family of old and new friends on a trip to strange and exotic lands.

Let the show begin.

Continued on page 4

An 'ordinary guy' doing unusual things, photographer, filmmaker and storyteller William Jans has attraced a large following to live shows about his travel adventures and the people he loves to meet

SNOW CRACKDOWN • MORE SHELTERS • DARK TOUR GUIDE

cover

Multimedia performance documents eclectic travel experiences

Continued from page 1

The lights inside the Rio dim, and a gorgeous photo of a mountain range appears on the screen. In the dark, a strange cackle comes over the PA from somewhere near the stage. As a spotlight shines on a podium to the left of the stage, a tall man with a bald head and rimless glasses suddenly appears, wearing a ridiculously loud costume with parrots on the shoulders. "Welcome to *Solo in South America*, folks," he says. "I picked this up at the carnival in Rio. Hey, isn't it amazing what you can find in the trash?"

A William Jans show, as the evening reveals, is a multimedia storytelling extravaganza revealing crazy adventures he has undertaken in exotic parts of the world. The show comes complete with live narration by Jans, stunning photography, music he's recorded on location, crazy costumes and props, video clips of him in hilarious situations, and various souvenirs he's picked up on his travels that he shares with his audiences as door prizes during the "interactive" periods of the show.

This is not your typical travelogue sponsored by a travel company to extol destinations to which they would like you to buy expensive tickets. It's backpack travel for ordinary people who want to get off the beaten track and see real people and real life. The show comes alive because of Jans' knack for breaking down barriers with the people he meets on the road, and it's obvious everyone in the theatre is having a heck of a good time, like a Jimmy Buffet concert without the intoxicants.

The secret of Jans' success appears to be his unique ability to put people at ease, whether it's in the theatre or on his trips. Like a great movie or book, when you go to a Jans show it seems it is you and not Jans who is really on the trip. People obviously identify with him, either at home or on the road. He's an average guy doing unusual things, albeit like a non-stop Energizer Bunny.

Jans strutted his stuff at the sold out premiere of *Solo in South America* at the Ridge Theatre in 2005.

photo courtesy **William Jans**

"It's like going to a movie, only the movie comes alive," says dedicated fan Daien Ide, who has been to several shows. "He's very engaging, very energetic and friendly. He brings the destinations alive. He tells stories about the history and geography and modern politics, and his still photos are phenomenal. The stories he tells stick with you and you come home feeling inspired and tell all your friends. It's just like going there yourself. He comes out to the lineup outside the theatre and fools around, so that's part of the show, too. He appears in the audience wearing different costumes. He engages with people, and there are great prizes to win."

Solo in South America features Jans swimming in the Amazon with piranhas and crocodiles, climbing a 6,000-metre peak and going down a silver mine in Bolivia, hiking to Machu Picchu, and partying at the carnival in Rio. Jans invites door prize winners to come up on stage and sample 98 per cent proof Bolivian liquor. He hands out souvenirs. It's an interactive show, almost like the old *Rocky Horror Picture Show* where you threw toast at the screen.

In the lobby, Glenn Simmons is checking out the photos and posters on display. Simmons has been to seven shows, and although he has seen *Solo in South America* he is back again with several friends who passed the message on to other friends. Word of mouth seems to be the most important form advertising Jans does, along with collecting email addresses that direct traffic to his site (www.wrjphoto.com). His fans are like a giant cult or clan gathered together to hear the words of the returning wanderer.

"I'm really into travel and photography and I travel on a budget," says Simmons. "I first heard of these shows about five years ago from a friend. William's enthusiasm for the people he meets really shows. He's so personable and genuine. There's no judging going on."

It turns out that the smiling lady selling the fridge magnets and postcards in the lobby is none other than Jans' mother Janet, who volunteers her time—as does her husband Bill, and several of William's friends—at all her son's shows.

"It's so exciting being part of the show," she says, rolling up a T-shirt and popping it in a bag for a fan. "People always seem to want to buy souvenirs. William brings back fascinating things like rocks from holy mountains and strange artifacts. We never used to travel, but after hearing all his stories we have been to Vietnam, China and Russia. He gets people so excited they want to travel themselves."

Mrs. Jans, along with husband Bill, sells and takes tickets, makes change, helps people with disabilities find a seat, gathers up the cards on which people write their name for door prizes, or anything that's needed. "We are very proud of what he's accomplished," she says. "He learns all the languages before going on his trips, he never talks down to anybody he meets no matter who they are, and he makes friends so easily."

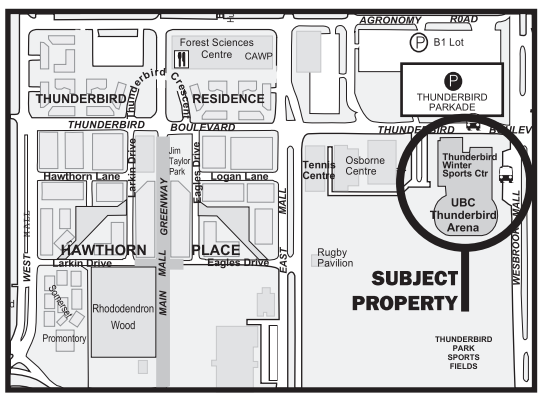
Continued on page 5

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Public Open House

UBC Athletics and Recreation is proposing a structural change to an existing liquor primary and food primary license in the UBC Thunderbird Arena. Drawings of proposed amendments are available at www.sportfacilities.ubc.ca/redlines.htm

The property is located in the Mid Campus Neighbourhood on the site labeled "Subject Property', see location map below.



Date: Tuesday January 13th
Time: 4:00pm – 6:00pm
Location: 2555 Wesbrook Mall, Mezzanine level
Questions: Kavie Toor, Associate Director Facilities
e-mail: ktoor@interchange.ubc.ca
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When not globetrotting, Jans works as a corporate photographer

Continued from page 4

So far, starting in 1989, Jans has produced five interactive presentations, 13 times selling out the theatres in which they played, including Top of the World (Nepal and Tibet), Trekking In Tibet (Laos, China and Tibet), Solo in South America, Burma Bound (Vietnam and Burma, now known as Myanmar), and the upcoming Tales from Tanzania.

Trekking in Tibet saw Jans climbing Mt. Everest to Camp Four at 6,500 metres (losing 18 pounds and infecting seven out of 10 fingers in the process). In Burma Bound, Jans (trying to order food "without onions") mispronounced the phrase and inadvertently accused the waitress of being a prostitute. A local man in Vietnam apologized for his poor English. Jans said: "I think you speak English very well." To which the local replied: "I think you are just trying to fondle me." In fact, Jans speaks nine languages with some degree of proficiency, but manages to mangle various phrases to the great delight of his viewers.

Born in Winnipeg, Jans moved to Ottawa, Saskatoon, and Richmond before his family settled in Vancouver in 1977, so maybe travel is in his blood. His first trip was Hawaii at age 12, then England at 16, but the six months he spent in Asia in 1989 changed his life. "Some people travel to see places but I travel to meet people. I was so inspired by the people I met and the way I was welcomed that travel became my passion."

He's a graduate of the Langara photo technology program and doesn't have any travel heroes except the folks he meets on the road, ("the Joe Q. Public travellers who try hard to fit in to the cultures and countries they visit"). Mom and Dad travel like their son ("low to the ground") but his sister prefers more comfort. Jans prefers to travel solo, but wouldn't mind some assistance when it comes to filming on location ("because it's very hard work") and his future goal remains getting his own TV travel show.

When not travelling, Jans lives in a lovely old three-storey house in Mt. Pleasant that he has spent a decade lovingly restoring to its former splendour. A corporate photographer by trade, his clients include CITY TV, Port Metro Vancouver and Vancouver General Hospital.

He does aerial photography and shoots live events ranging from corporate functions for Ford and Nissan to gala evenings for the Canadian Association of Broadcasters.

Continued on page 6

During his stay in Maasai Boma, Tanzania, Jans camped out under the stars. Note the thorn fence designed to repel marauding hyenas.

photo courtesy **William Jans**

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Fans note show's energy, 'cultural sensitivity'

Continued from page 5

He's composed portraits of the Dalai Lama and scads of rock stars, but his passion is travel and the people he meets along the way.

"My trips each last about two to three months, and I do one every three years," says Jans, buzzing around his house like a puppy left off its leash. "When I get home it takes me about a year to create one of my performances, and every second of video that you see on the screen takes about an hour to edit. It's a very long process to put together a two-hour performance, and I do everything myself."

The house includes a professional photo studio on the main floor. In the living room, Jans creates his performances using a MacBook Pro, a PC and seven hard drives. Getting close to show time, he works as much as 18 hours a day for several weeks. Tickets to his shows are $20, but Jans says he's lucky to break even considering the time and effort involved. He rents the halls and theatres, pays all expenses and takes the risks involved, like if few people show up as happened once in Alberta.

His house is also something of a museum, with photos of rock stars (he has shot images of celebrities from David Bowie to Michael J. Fox) and of his many trips, masks from Tibet to Borneo, and his amazing collection of Coca Cola bottles from dozens of countries.

"The collection started in India," he says with a big grin, reaching for one of 27 bottles lining a door frame in the hallway, "when I found this weird bottle of Campa Cola. Evidently the Indian government wouldn't let Coke sell their product in India without divulging the contents, and Coke won't do that. So an Indian company started bottling Campa Cola, which you will notice looks exactly like the real thing. Whatever country I am in, I try to find a bottle of the local Coke, or a replica, and bring it back. Always full, never unopened. Usually the replicas are more interesting."

On the second floor sits a massive bed and chest of drawers he actually shipped all the way home—at considerable expense—from Vietnam. All of the carpentry in the renovated house is his own.

> *"My trips each last about two to three months, and I do one every three years."*
> **—William Jans**

There is a drum kit on the third floor, on which Jans will bash away to expend some of his prodigious energy. Tall (6'1"), trim and muscular, clean shaven (well, bald is the operative word), single (recently ending a relationship), young (early 40s, but "please don't print that or it will scare any kids") and a regular jogger who doesn't smoke or drink, Jans looks and sounds more like a hyperactive athlete than a videographer, but it's the crazy blend of energy and sensitivity that attracts people to his performances.

"His shows are absolutely kick-ass," says fan Adrian Wilson, via email. "He has a gift for photography and interacting with people. His cultural sensitivity is exceptional. If a guy like Ian Wright (from *Lonely Planet*) can get his own show on the Outdoor Life Network then William should have a weekly TV series."

Vancouver TV producer Randy Eustache-Walden is trying to land Jans a TV show. Eustache-Walden thinks Jans is a natural for the small screen, and it's just a matter of time before Jans is discovered. "I think there is no question he will end up on TV," says Eustache-Walden. "All the travel shows these days are 'host-based,' which means it's not the destination that counts, it's the personality of the host. He's got a very interesting look—the tall white guy with a shaved head and glasses and a big grin—and he really stands out. He's got a quirky personality. He interacts well with everyone. If he could find the time to do a tour of the country he'd be a real hit, but no one outside of Vancouver knows who he is yet. He's still an unknown."

Aside from being unknown outside of his growing legion of loyal fans, Eustache-Walden admits that Jans isn't good at promoting himself, though he has had a fair amount of coverage in local newspapers, including the *Courier*. Although Jans is a professional with a camera and does all his own video editing, his website needs improvement. For instance, there are no DVDs for sale on the site. He needs to advertise more. Heck, maybe what Jans really needs is an agent.

"The economic downturn has an up side," says Eustache-Walden. "People are staying home and not going to the movies, so TV ratings are up. If people can't afford to travel, maybe armchair travel shows could get a big boost. His trips aren't to the kinds of places where you can sell ads, so he needs a sponsor, too."

Those in the cult that is the William Jans fan club are excited to learn that their intrepid hero will be back on the road this month with shows in Vancouver, Victoria, Nanaimo and Edmonton. His next extravaganza Tales from Tanzania will see him climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro and generally acting like a nutbar while making new friends wherever he goes.

"The owner of this Maasai corral where I stayed had six wives," says Jans, "and one told me that they typically would not allow vegetables to get into their pots and 'contaminate them.' The Maasai pretty much eat only meat and ugali, a corn flour mix that looks like mashed potatoes. They slaughtered a goat for me, and I was 'honoured' to be allowed to eat the spinal cord for breakfast. Actually, to tell the truth, Cheerios would have been just fine."

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