THINGS TO DO > THEATER

Pass the relish, please: Play heats up the history of hot dogs



Dig into the dog: Michael Quinn will bring his one-man show "Feltman: World's First Hot Dog" to Orlando. The play looks at the creation and appeal of the humble hot dog. (Courtesy Michael Quinn)



By **MATTHEW J. PALM** | mpalm@orlandosentinel.com | Orlando Sentinel
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Well, hot dog! Michael Quinn is bringing his one-man play about the creation of the grilling staple to Orlando for a one-night-only engagement.

Quinn is a New York-based actor, writer, historian, and teacher who got so caught up in the history of the hot dog that he started his own business and sold them for a time.

Directed by Fringe Festival veteran Peter Michael Marino, the hourlong "Feltman: World's First Hot Dog" has been well received at the Edinburgh Fringe, where it got a four-star review from The Scotsman, and in New York City. Charles Feltman is credited with inventing the hot dog in 1867 at New York's most famous amusement park, Coney Island.

"This is the story of a man history forgot," says Quinn. "Charles Feltman changed American food forever, and somehow most people have never heard his name. I get to bring him — and the wild, colorful world of old Coney Island — back to life."

We asked Quinn 10 questions about his show — and the food.

Q: How did you get interested in the history of hot dogs?

A: I've always been fascinated by New York history, especially Coney Island. When I started researching Feltman's, I realized the hot dog had a much bigger story than I'd ever imagined. It connected immigration, entrepreneurship and the birth of modern Coney Island.

Q: What do you like most about eating a hot dog?

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A: There's something wonderfully simple about it. A hot dog with natural casing is the way to go. A good hot dog can bring back memories of city hot dog carts, the ballpark or a summer day in Brooklyn.

Q: What fascinated you most about the story of Feltman's?

A: Charles Feltman started with a simple idea: Serve a hot sausage in a roll so people could eat while they walked along the beach. From that small beginning, he built an extraordinary Coney Island empire, including what was described as the largest restaurant in the world. It's an incredible story about a German immigrant, and so many people don't know about it!

Q: What prompted you to revive the brand on Coney Island?

A: Once I learned the history, I couldn't let it disappear. Feltman's was part of Coney Island's identity, and I felt the story deserved to be brought back to life. I started with research, then turned that into a real business.

Q: What was running a hot dog business like?

A: It was exciting, exhausting and completely unpredictable. There was far more to it than selling hot dogs: sourcing, production, distribution, staffing and keeping the business moving every day. You will learn all about it in my play. I loved building something connected to New York history, but it definitely took a lot of hustle.

From humble beginnings, hot dogs became ingrained in American life, as shown in this 1945 Chicago Tribune photo of Rose Mary Parrington and Charles Rogers. (Josef Szalay/Chicago Tribune)

Q: What do you say to those who claim a hamburger is more all-American than the hot dog?

A: I'd say the hot dog belongs in that conversation. It's tied to immigration, baseball, Coney Island and generations of American summers. The hamburger can have its place, but the hot dog has a pretty remarkable story of its own.

Q: How do you present the Feltman story onstage?

A: I perform all the characters myself in "Feltman: World's First Hot Dog." I also wrote the play. I take the audience from Feltman's first hot dog cart in 1867 through the rise of his Coney Island restaurant, while bringing the people around him to life. There's history, drama and some humor along the way.

Q: What has audience response been like?

A: People are often surprised to learn how much there is to the story. They come in thinking it's just about a hot dog and leave with a whole new picture of Coney Island and the man who helped shape it. Everyone leaves wanting a hot dog! The response has been very warm, and audiences have told me they enjoy seeing a piece of New York history brought to life.

Q: What's your record for number of hot dogs eaten at one time?

A: I never kept a record. I've spent enough time around hot dogs to know that enjoying one is better than turning it into a competition.

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Q: What is your favorite way to dress and eat a hot dog?

A: I'm a classic New Yorker: mustard and sauerkraut. Also raw onions, if available. You don't have to overcomplicate a good hot dog.

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'Feltman: World's First Hot Dog'

• **Where:** Orlando Family Stage, 1001 E. Princeton St. in Orlando

• **When:** 7:30 p.m. Oct. 23

• **Cost:** $37

• **Info:** FeltmanWorldsFirstHotDog.com

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