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Young and old fair-goers itch to see the extraordinary

By Denyse Tannenbaum

Featuring bloodsucking wingless insects as acrobatic entertainers, strangely enough, Jim Alberti draws children and adults to his worn red stage at the Prince William County Fair.

It's an odd phenomenon, the idea of watching something the size of a pinhead jump over hurdles or leap from a miniature 30-rung ladder into a tin bucket of water. But the flea circus has been a fair feature as long as there have been fairs and fleas, the latter with which man and beast have been uncomfortably familiar for centuries.

And flea circuses likely will continue to please their audiences well into the 21st century, said Alberti, who is a third-generation flea impresario who performs across the country year-round. His family has been in the flea entertainment business since the 1880s.

Part of the show's charm is Alberti himself, a witty, former professor at the NC School of the Arts, who, wearing an authentic black felt bowler and a brass-buttoned vest, relates each flea's challenge with the finesse of an old-world showman.

The 53-year-old Washington, D.C., native has been performing with his flea circus full-time for the last four years along with his son, Darryl. It reminds him of when he was a boy doing shows with his grandfather, a fun-loving man with a deadpan sense of humor.

"His eyes sparkled," Alberti said, "everybody else's, well you know."

The fleas are so small, children and adults alike are uncertain whether they are really watching fleas jump, run, step and roll over, or simply a deft hand perform—and Alberti likes it that way. "One woman wrote me a wonderful letter about a controversy raging in the back seat of a station wagon to the tune of 'yes, there were,' 'no there weren't,'" he said, with a delighted grin.

"It was quite interesting" said 10-year-old Tracee Tsui of Haymarket after the show. It looked like there was no flea at all.

"I liked the show," said Brian Johnston, a freckled 9-year-old from Nokesville. "You can't do that every day—train fleas. It's rare to see that happen."

It's no fluke that the flea circus continues to be a thriving part of any county fair, Alberti said. "It captures children where they really live," he said. "Children are very, very flea-like. My fleas are good-humored, energetic and hardworking. And God knows kids are hardworking