Sole mates are clowns at heart

It’s feet first for Wayne and Marty Scott, who make funny footwear for Ringling Bros. Circus.

FRIDAY EXTRA-18
A Central Florida couple gives circus clowns happy feet. PAGE 18 BIG SHOES TO FILL
It's feet first for a couple that makes clown shoes for Ringling Bros. Circus.

SILLY SOLES

By Jennifer Barns

Wayne and Marty Scott have a few words of wisdom for the cynical or the snide, the dogged or the downtrodden.

"Everybody in the whole world should have the chance to be in the circus for a year," says Wayne, 71, standing tall in a pair of checkerboard wingtips. "If you do, you will never run down your fellow man. You will realize that if he doesn't agree with you, that's OK. You will learn to live and let live."

It sure seems to make sense up here in Howey-in-the-Hills, or as they call it, the breathtaking patch of slightly high ground the Scotts call home. The air seems fresher, the sky seems brighter - on a clear evening, Marty can see the fireworks explode over Walt Disney World. It sure seems to make sense up here.

That's because they make shoes for clowns.

They also make shoes for opera companies, television show and feature films. They once made a pair of clown shoes for Johnny Cash and often make boots for members of Garth's Crew.

And by mid-December, they had finished about 50 pairs of footwear for folks in the latest edition of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

The Scotts, who own and operate Clown Shoes & Props Inc., are among the world's few custom cobbler, making 250 to 300 pairs of clown shoes a year. Typically, they're ordered by circus performers and magicians who need to exude excitement literally down to their toes.

"They need shoes that are bigger than life because their costume - and often their persona - is supposed to be bigger than life," says Marty, 66. "It ties their head to their feet."

It also has secured a respected reputation for the Scotts, who began making shoes in the mid-1970s after their own big bow under the big top.

The Scotts met at a roller rink on Davis Islands in the summer of 1953 - Wayne's family was on vacation from Michigan and Marty loved to skate when he wasn't working at the Sulphur Springs community pool. On their first date, they visited the sponge docks at Tarpon Springs. After a short stint in the Navy, Wayne and Marty married.

They drove throughout the South on their honeymoon, and the pair fondly recalls seeing circus being set up along the road. It was a so-called "mud" show - a small circus set up under a tent - and to this day, it remains their favorite entertainment.

In addition to funny footwear for clowns, Wayne and Marty Scott have made shoes for opera companies, television shows and feature films.

WHEN: Tonight through Sunday.
Tampa show times are 7:30 p.m. today and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday. Petersburg show times are 7:30 p.m. Wednesday through Jan. 14, 11 a.m. Jan. 12-14, 3 p.m. Jan. 13-15.

WHERE: Ice Palace, 401 Channel Drive, Tampa; Bayfront Center Arena, 400 First St. N., St. Petersburg.

TICKETS: $11.75, $14.75, $18.75 and $28; Ice Palace box office, (813) 321-2900; Bayfront Center Arena box office, (727) 892-5767; tickets also available through Ticketmaster outlets, (813) 287-6844, or at www.ringling.com
Wayne worked hard and often, at jobs that showcased his handyness talents. Marty says there was (and still is) very little Wayne couldn’t fix: cars, furnaces, electrical systems. He ran a garage and a marina, drove a truck and repaired motors. When a fire destroyed the garage and marina in 1960, Wayne tried construction, worked in the oil fields and began to develop “horrible ulcers.” The dog-eat-dog, pinch-a-penny world didn’t suit his sweet disposition, Marty says.

Maybe that’s why, in 1968, someone gave him a copy of Amusement Business Magazine, which featured a tiny classified advertisement placed by Ringling Bros. It read simply: clowns wanted. Though he was 39 years old at the time, Wayne had spent years preparing for the role, from schmoozing as the company Santa to cutting up as the birthday clown. He put together a hobo bit and sent it in.

Ultimately, Wayne was one of the first to graduate from Ringling’s clown college in Venice.

Happily, Marty and their four children joined the circus. Wayne was a clown, yes, and Marty helped out with costumes. But Wayne also served as a night watchman, worked in prop repair and was one of Ringling’s electricians and mechanics.

“It was wonderful ... one giant extended family,” says Marty. “But the kids — four of them — didn’t think they had to study.”

Sadly, Wayne says, this situation forced the family to leave the circus after only one year. Wayne went to work for an air conditioner company in Orlando and retired in 1992.

Still, the big top called. When the Shriners asked the Scotts to make a pair of shoes for its circus folk in the early 1970s, the Scotts happily jumped in — feet first.

They taught themselves how to make custom shoes, learning the differences between a vamp (the front portion of a shoe) and a quarter (the back portion). Now, it takes them about six hours to craft a single pair of all-leather sneakers or buckled-up Mary Janes, an exhaustive, round-rhinocerous ritual the Scotts perform in a tiny room on their property.

It begins with a carefully drawn outline of the person’s foot. These measurements are transferred to a last, a wooden or plastic form of the foot, and then leather is cut, stretched and stuffed. Puffy toes are crammed with horsehair. Soles are sanded. Heels are nailed.

The Scotts demonstrate the process with a flourish, finishing each other’s sentences, and giggling and teasing each other along the way. Marty says when Wayne has to custom-fit a pair of shoes for a pretty girl, he usually sends her on an errand.

“I think all of this is a release for us,” says Marty with a grin, though lately she’s frustrated by foot problems. Her right leg is confined inside a brace to immobilize an injured ankle. “That year in the circus made us easygoing. It made us realize that the important thing is being together.”

It also has made the tougher jobs easier to tackle. One year, the Scotts had to make a pair of shoes with individual toes that curled up. Another time, they had to make a pair of size 24 shoes for Giant Gonzales, a character on Hulk Hogan’s now defunct TV series, “Thunder in Paradise.” And when producers of the movie “Eddie,” starring Whoopi Goldberg, wanted fancy shoes for horses, well, they tried that, too.

“We even put them on our neighbors’ horses,” says Wayne, who laughs at their failed attempt at filly footwear.

Clowns and magicians consult the Scotts’ catalog of styles, which start at around $200 a pair. They also build props and gags for their kooky clientele, and every year travel the country passing on their secrets to clowning with creativity.

“The circus really is for children of all ages,” says Wayne. “Just look at us.”

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Jennifer Barrs can be reached at jbaars@ tampatrib.com or (813) 259-7832. To order a pair of clown shoes, telephone (352) 324-3256.

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