

WHAT'S IN A DAME



JENNIFER CHRISTMAN

## Eye test is a puff of blind concern

I don't fear heights, spiders, snakes, needles or death.

I fear glaucoma.

Although I'm not sure I fear glaucoma — defined by Merriam-Webster's online dictionary as "a disease of the eye marked by increased pressure within the eyeball that can result in damage to the optic disk and gradual loss of vision."

I fear the test for glaucoma.

You've likely experienced the fright too, as part of a regular eye exam— every two years (as is recommended) or every, um, decade (when you eventually lose or destroy your "spare" pair of glasses after you destroy, then fix with tape and then lose your "good" pair). Or when you remove your eyelash extensions with a twinge of remorse and hope to amplify your regular lashes via doctor-prescribed Latisse (originally formulated, interestingly enough, to treat glaucoma).

The glaucoma test has a name. It's called NCT, which stands for "Non-Contact Tonometry." But it could just as easily stand for "Not Cool Technology" or "Never Comfortable Terror."

Instead of spitting fire, this monster spits air, directly into your delicate eyes.

After being seated before the beast, you are directed to position your chin and forehead on the machine, keep your eyes open, peer at the green light and— heh! — to relax, knowing an abrupt blast of wind is about to blow forth into your globular vision organs.

"ROAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!"

Fine, so it's a petite puff.

"Pfft."

But you're positive it will feel gale-force and therefore can't stop fluttering.

"Try not to blink" and "Try to think about something else" suggests the technician, as if either is possible.

After a few blink-delayed moments, she's finally able to get a reading.

"Pfft."

Whew. All done!

With one eye. Remember, you have two of them. More wiggling, winking and wincing.

"Pfft."

From there the eye exam isn't as harrowing as it is humbling (um, is that a 5 or a G? Am I vision impaired or am I illiterate?). And then it's over.

With prescription in hand, it's now time for the fun of selecting lenses and frames! Wait, those frames are how much?

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# R.A.O. from dawn till dusk

## Rent a video, get a haircut, buy a bong: R.A.O. Video has you covered

CHEREE FRANCO  
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Downtown Little Rock's R.A.O. Video houses the most diverse adult movie collection in a tri-state area. The front window advertises bongs and sex toys, alongside life-size cut-outs of Marilyn Monroe, Cher, Yosemite Sam and Angelina Jolie. Upstairs there's the adult arcade — several dark-paneled closets, where \$1 buys four minutes of privacy.

Even so, R.A.O. is a family place. And it's a good neighbor, albeit in ways that may never be championed by the Downtown Little Rock Partnership or any neighborhood association.

R.A.O. opens from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week. Victor Oliver, 38, runs the shop that his father, Robert Abraham Oliver (R.A.O.), started 35 years ago.

Early on a Friday morning, Victor is at his computer, researching soon-to-be released films. He has even facial features and salt and pepper hair, which complement the computer science degree he no longer uses and the real estate license he still uses, because R.A.O. doesn't offer a 401(k). He owns property as a retirement investment and this weekend, he and his wife, an accountant at Stephens Inc., will take their small sons on a cruise.

Victor's childhood wasn't about cruises, but he never minded. He hung out in the pool or the store, recommending movies and testing Nintendo games before they hit the shelves.

Once, in 1984, he told a man in animal-print boots that he should rent *Runaway* because of the cool, robotic spiders.

"I'm in that movie," the man said.

His uncle asked the man for his autograph and rang up a dozen videos, which Gene Simmons took back to the Peabody Little Rock hotel. That was how Victor learned about KISS.

Actor Judge Reinhold is a more regular customer, although Victor hasn't seen him lately.

"That's because he's in California, shooting a TV series," volunteers Eric Woods, 43, who has worked at R.A.O. for 13 years.

Adult fare comprises about a quarter of R.A.O.'s roughly 20,000-title inventory, and in the pre-streaming era, the store had 15 employees. Now there are only seven, and the Olivers have diversified.

"We put in the head shop, which has been doing really well. We have the hair care. I provide what they need. They just pay to have a chair," says Victor, referring to a salon next door. They also sell

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Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JOHN SYKES JR.



Victor Oliver (left) grew up at R.A.O. Video, which was founded by his father, Robert Oliver (right) in 1977.

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JOHN SYKES JR.

## Clowns herald Ringling ring

ERIC E. HARRISON  
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

One ring to rule them all and in the darkness bind them ...

No, it's not J.R.R. Tolkien. We're talking Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's "Next Generation of Circus 2.0. All-New Gold Edition — Fully Charged," which will be charging into North Little Rock's Verizon Arena from Thursday-Sunday and Arkansas State University's Convocation Center in Jonesboro from June 13-16.

This show is in one busy ring, not three.

"One Ring. A Thousand Memorable Moments," boasts the news release for the so-called "Greatest Show on Earth."

"One ring: Three rings of fun wrapped up in one," explains clown Dave Gregg.

Gregg and wife Cherie, veterans of Ringling Bros. rings since 1999 (Cherie Gregg says she got two years off "for good behavior"), are in their seventh year as the circus' "Ambassadors of Laughter."



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON

Dave and Cherie Gregg, "Ambassadors of Laughter" for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, do a little clowning in a May 13 show, centering on Dr. Seuss' *If I Ran the Circus*, at the Central Arkansas Library System's Children's Library in Little Rock. The Greggs will be part of Ringling Bros.' "Fully Charged" Gold Edition performances this week at Verizon Arena.

**PLUS**  
Scan the photo above or go to [arkansasonline.com/videos](http://arkansasonline.com/videos)

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THEATER

## Shakespeare troupe spotlights the family

JENNIFER NIXON  
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

An aging king makes a tragic mistake while a couple of orphans search for their places in the world and a theatrical troupe and some troublesome fairies run amok.

It's not exactly your average June in Arkansas.

This is the seventh summer for the Arkansas Shakespeare Theatre, which was founded by Rollin Potter, dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Central Arkansas at Conway in 2006. The first season of performances was in 2007.

"He wanted to have an opportunity to have more professional theater in the region and then also have an educational arm to it as well," artistic director Rebekah

Scallet says.

Students from UCA and other universities around the state and the country are taking part, as performers or as crew members, building sets, making costumes, working backstage.

"They're working alongside these professionals and having an opportunity to be exposed to a higher level of theater than they get normally during the school year," Scallet says.

Since its inception, the festival has grown from four plays with nine performances over two weeks to four plays with 23 performances over four weeks.

This year's roster includes

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# Video store's stats and facts

**R.A.O. Video: a snapshot**  
**Open since** 1977  
**10,000** members  
**20,000** movies (75 percent general audience, 25 percent adult)  
**Membership:** free if you live or work downtown; \$3 otherwise  
**New releases:** \$1.50/night, \$3/three nights  
**Old movies:** \$1/night, \$2/three nights  
**Adult movies:** \$3.50/three nights, \$5/week

**Registry robberies:** one.  
**Warrants issued for theft of leased property:** thousands  
**Security cameras:** 30  
**Robert Oliver's favorite film:** *Imitation of Life* (1959 version)  
**Biggest controversies:**  
 Victor Oliver: "About 13 years ago ... they tried to shut down several [adult] stores ... we were never actually shut down, but they arrested a few people ... my dad got arrested and one or two employees who were here at the time.

So the next shift came in, started running it, and they were out that same day. They went to court and the judge just threw it out."  
 Robert Oliver: "There was one movie in particular. It's just a common movie now, but they almost closed me up over it. It was a Roman Empire movie, where they stuck swords in people and cut them open and stuff, and it was banned ... they were threatening to arrest everybody who handled *Caligula* (1979)."  
 — Cheree Franco



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JOHN SYKES JR.

George Neal has been renting films from R.A.O. since 2000.

## R.A.O.

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 shaved ices at the counter and used movies on Amazon.com. But rental customers are still their bread and butter, in part because R.A.O. caters to a specific demographic — and much of that demographic never makes it to the second floor.  
 At 8:20 a.m., a man shuffles in. His eyes dart around, checking for other customers. Eric is on the register. This is good. The customer, who has a traumatic brain injury, is skittish and easily confused. He deals only with Eric or Victor. He mumbles something that Victor overhears from the front office, 10 feet away.  
 "Charge what you want," Victor calls. "Your credit's good."

R.A.O. doesn't issue credit as a matter of course, but this man is an exception. "He comes in on the 3rd and pays it all off," Victor explains. "We treat him fairly. We don't charge any interest, and he knows that."

Some R.A.O. customers are from nearby rent-subsidized apartments that house the elderly and mentally ill. These customers may not have credit cards or Internet access required by Netflix and Redbox. Others just enjoy chatting with their friends. For the most part, employees count their tenure in decades and know their customers by name.

★★★

In 1977, Robert read about a new technology in *The Wall Street Journal*. "You could film stuff and play it back on TV. You didn't have to get it developed or edited by the government. To me it was a freedom. I'm not into censorship ... if I want to film myself having sex and play it back on TV, that's my business," he says.

The article noted that Hollywood movies would soon be available on video. So Robert leased a 10-by-10-foot kiosk on Main Street for \$200 a month and posted a sign for video

rentals. He started with Beta tapes — five Westerns and five adult films, retailing for about \$70 apiece. He also began to sell and rent video equipment. Low-end video cassette recorders went for \$400, but he would rent them for \$15 a day. Films rented for \$5 each. Robert also had a 70-inch TV that businesses and Trekkie conventions would use for \$250 a day.

But the public didn't get it. So for five years, Robert operated a video education booth at the Arkansas State Fair's Hall of Industry. He also offered powerful incentive. "Do you want to know the hottest video I ever had? The Orange Bowl, with Arkansas and Oklahoma [1978]. I copied it, and if I needed them to buy a VCR, I'd say, 'Man, I'll give you the Orange Bowl,'" he remembers.

Beta was higher quality than VHS, but Beta didn't make it. And Robert knows why: "Back then, the only reason people bought VHS players was to record football games. Beta was only a two-hour tape. Then VHS made four-hour tapes, and you can't record football games on two-hour tapes."

A lot of people wanted to record football games, so R.A.O. outgrew the kiosk and moved to the Donaghey Building at Main and Seventh streets, and then, in 1991, to another Main Street location. In 2001, Robert bought his current building. He gave R.A.O. the first and second floors and converted the third to living quarters.

Robert's family say he has "mellowed" over the years, but at 74, he still does shop maintenance work, bikes to the bank and entertains guests in his third-floor condo, which is equal parts bachelor pad and Playboy mansion.

There's a sauna, low-light Jacuzzi, tanning bed, skylight atrium and row of vintage arcade games. There are also two pool tables, two projectors and extra bedrooms. But the furniture is sparse, the wall-to-wall carpet is worn, the beds are unmade and the kitchen is downstairs, at the back of the video store.

When Robert flips on a pro-

jector, the wall is flooded with a backyard pool scene, circa early '80s. There he is, taut and barely middle-age, lounging on a chair in his Speedo while the neighborhood teenagers mill about, adjusting bikinis. It's a frat-boy dream, except that Robert was never in a fraternity, because he never made it to college.

The oldest of six kids, he spent teenage summers picking cotton and running a projector at a movie theater. He graduated from Central High School just before the desegregation crisis, worked at the McCrory-McClellan dime store lunch counter during the Civil Rights sit-ins and traveled all over the country for Western Electric, converting telephone hubs from operator to automatic switching. Just three years ago, he won the Billiard Congress of America National Championship tournament in Las Vegas.

All of the Olivers are colorful. A sister founded the *Little Rock Free Press*, a brother started a sprinkler company and became a millionaire and another robbed a bar and was murdered in jail. According to Robert, the latter is why he takes on what Victor calls "Dad's projects."

Robert Oliver's projects are actually people — friends who need a place to dry out, single mothers who need help with college, anyone who could use a break and a job.

★★★

Kathleen Tucker, 26, has run the head shop for about a year. It's the first job she has ever kept.

"I was irresponsible, didn't care. Now I'm in school, have my own place, my kids back in my life. I don't know where I'd be without Bob helping me, making sure I stay on my feet and come to work every day," she says. Sometimes Kathleen's mother calls Robert just to thank him for watching out.

Kathleen beams, rises from her computer, tugs at her shorts and steps behind a glass counter full of pipes: "I love ordering stuff. It's like going birthday shopping for yourself ... I do as much research as I can,



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JOHN SYKES JR.

The R.A.O. staff share a close bond. Eric Woods, Kathleen Tucker, Nina Oliver and Katina Williams tease and support each other like family members.

about the types of glass, how heat-resistant they are, where they're blown at, what type of acrylic is in the middle." As for the toys, "I try my best to make people feel comfortable ... I let them know that nothing they say is going to offend me, shock me, make me laugh at them or judge them," she says.

The morning has been slow. Kathleen sold three adult toys, and there was a trickle of movie customers.

By early afternoon, Kathleen is gone. Robert's youngest sister, Nina Oliver, and her long-time boyfriend, Bryan Fooks, have arrived, as has Katina Williams, 33, who used to come into the store with her mother. Now she has worked here for 11 years. Nina has worked nights for 27 years, and Bryan, for 20.

Kathleen sprinkles something floral-scented in the carpet and vacuums downstairs, while George Neal, 55, a ballroom dancer and computer programmer, browses new releases.

"I have Internet at home — you can watch anything you want to, really — but you get better flavor here. The interactions with people, the whole ritual," he says, taking in Nina, Katina and Bryan with a sweeping hand gesture. He has been a member for 13 years.

Around 5 p.m., there's an afternoon rush, people just off from downtown jobs. They swarm the racks and form an eager line behind the shaved ice machine. Then, suddenly, the place is dead.

Katina opens her compact and applies powder, texts her friend about seeing *Fast and Fu-*

rious 6, checks the return box for movies that need shelving. Then she shakes her head and says, "Riverfest."

"It's going to be slow," Nina agrees. "They'll take up all the parking."

A frantic would-be Riverfester dashes into the store, calling for a bathroom. "Y'all are the only place open, and it was an hour looking for parking and an hour in the car," the woman squeals. Nina points her in the right direction.

When it's slow, Nina usually cooks. But Robert opens the fridge, declares it empty, and calls in a pizza.

At 6:30, Katina makes the rounds upstairs, straightening displays and checking behind racks for stashed boxes. (Eric mentioned this phenomena earlier: "When I catch them I say, 'We can reserve it, but we can't have you hiding it.'") At 7 p.m., Katina leaves. Nina and Bryan are here three more hours.

A homeless man spends a dollar in the arcade. Another homeless man changes coins for bills. A regular, Ray Fraizer, cashes his paycheck in the register — a privilege reserved for a few — and jokes about how he has been coming so long, he should get "picks," like the employees.

A man named John Nova trails his 7-year-old grandson, Jayion, around the store. Jayion chooses *Rio*, *World Wrestling* and *Tony Hawk*, and John points to the hundreds of laminated snapshots lining the top of the wall.

"My son is up there," he says. "I think we still have that

picture at home."

These photos are over a dozen years old. Robert used to shoot family portraits with the R.A.O. sign in the background, develop them across the street at the now-closed Osco Drug, post a copy on the wall, and give the customers an 8-by-10. He hoped they'd hang his advertising in their living rooms.

Another customer bursts in, nearly sideswiping Jayion and chattering breathlessly about his sister's pregnancy, his half brother's starring role in a Quentin Tarantino flick, his childhood in Miami, and by the way, did you hear, this guy got arrested? He's everywhere at once, bouncing among the new releases, leaning intently across the counter.

When he leaves, Bryan says, "This is a low-key night for him." Bryan isn't being sarcastic, either.

A man in a cowboy hat hands Nina a gift, a roll of venison sausage, before melting into the racks.

Occasionally the doorbell chimes, signaling that someone wants to be buzzed upstairs.

A handful of teenagers parade through the shop, the girls skimpily dressed, with too much makeup.

"Don't hit that buzzer," Bryan warns Nina.

A hipster couple, collectively attired in Pumas, a striped tee and a slouch-beanie, wander the aisles for an hour. They approach the register, Anna Nicole Smith's bio-pic in hand. They also have an entire season of *I Love Lucy*, and they're dismayed to discover that the five-disc collection rents for \$10. Nina gives it to them for \$5.

Then, just as Nina is about to total the register and close out for the night, the saddest woman in the world returns. She has been coming for years, and Nina has never seen her smile. Nor does she smile now. During the night's first appearance, she talked movies with Nina. This time, she can't get her ATM card to work. She thrusts a check across the counter, and Nina obligingly cashes it. It's the last transaction of the night at R.A.O. Video — a Main Street bastion that is, in a myriad of ways, the last of its kind.

## Circus

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A month or so before the circus comes to town, they show up as a sort of advance team, talking up the circus to members of the media and taking free education programs to schools, libraries, after-school programs and kids in hospitals.

The idea, Cherie Gregg says, is to bring the circus to children who otherwise might not be able to get to, "or who aren't having the best day."

They have two "set" shows. (They're not cast in stone, the Greggs say, meaning there's a little room for improvisation — they are clowns, after all, and by nature quick on both their physical and mental feet.)

The first, the one they put on May 13 at the Central Arkansas Library System's new Children's Library, is called "Reading With Ringling," centering on Dr. Seuss's *If I Ran the Circus*.

"Dr. Seuss inspires us to do a circus show," Cherie Gregg says. "And it might inspire some of the kids to do something themselves," adds Dave.

The other, Cherie Gregg says, is called "The Science of Circus," and deals with, say, the physics of the trapeze, "the same science as used in the Greatest Show on Earth."

When the circus does arrive, the Greggs are, of course, full participants, doing pretty much all the things circus clowns do. That includes some juggling, but, as Dave Gregg reminds, "We're not jugglers. We're clowns who juggle."

There are three circus shows on tour at any one time: Blue, Red and Gold editions. Blue and Red are more traditional shows and travel by train. Gold moves via trucks and trailers.

The Gold show, trumpets the Ringling Bros.' press release, features "Fully Charged ringmaster David



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON

Julian Campos, 8, helps clowns Cherie and Dave Gregg spin plates as the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus "Ambassadors of Laughter" entertain youngsters in a May 13 show at the Central Arkansas Library System's Children's Library in Little Rock.

Shipman" and the Lopez Family's "trifecta of extraordinary performances [including] knuckle-biting knife throwing, outrageous high-wire stunts and synchronized mayhem inside the globe of steel!"

The Greggs are in obvious awe of the knife-throwing act, at least. "We haven't had a knife-throwing act in a long time," says an admiring Cherie Gregg. "There are elephants and animals every year, but a knife-throwing act you don't see every day."

The Greggs describe the one-ring version of the circus as "more inti-

mate," and note even more intimacy is available through the "all-access pre-show" — an hour before curtain time, all ticket-holding circus patrons can come down onto the arena floor, meet the performers, take photos, try on costumes and take a little backstage tour.

"They can walk on a low wire, then watch [the performers] walk and ride a bicycle on a 40-foot-high one" in the circus proper, Dave Gregg says.

The Greggs, both Massachusetts natives, met at Ringling Bros. Clown College auditions — he's a

second-generation clown who started doing magic coin tricks at age 4; she also started performing at 4 and a Ringling Bros. show she saw at age 15 inspired her to become a clown.

In November 1999, they jointly joined Ringling Bros.' 130th Edition and subsequently toured with the 132nd, 133rd and 135th editions, too.

Together 21 years, "we love children — everybody else's," Cherie Gregg says. Surprisingly, perhaps, they say many circus performers travel with their kids; there's a backstage school and Halloween trick-or-

### Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus "Fully Charged" Gold Edition

**7 p.m. Thursday-Friday; 11 a.m., 3 and 7 p.m. Saturday; 1 and 5 p.m. Sunday**, Verizon Arena, East Broadway and Interstate 30, North Little Rock. All-Access Pre-show Power-Up Party on the arena floor one hour before the show, free to all ticket holders.

**Tickets:** \$51, \$41, \$31, \$21 (kids 2-12 \$11 for the bottom two price tiers) plus service charges; opening night, lowest-price adult tickets: \$12

(800) 745-3000

ticketmaster.com

**7 p.m. June 13-14, 1 and 5 p.m. June 15, 1 p.m. June 16**, Arkansas State University Convocation Center, 217 Olympic Drive, Jonesboro. All-Access Pre-show Power-Up Party on the arena floor one hour before the show, free to all ticket holders.

**Tickets:** \$15, \$20, \$35 (VIP)

(870) 972-2781

treating from one dressing room to another.

The Greggs stress the interactive nature of the circus — "it's live, before your very eyes, not television," Dave Gregg says — and notes that many of the performers "risk their lives for you every day," such as the wire walkers who work without a net dozens of feet above the arena floor.

"And that lady with the knives," Cherie Gregg adds. Being tied to a target with all those sharp-edged items flying toward her? "That takes a lot of trust and faith."