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Queens Karate Pioneer Brings Martial Arts Back To The Garden Page 1

by Dan Havlik

After more than 15 years, Queens karate pioneer Aaron Banks is finally getting back to the garden—Madison Square Garden, that is.

The 71-year-old Rego Park resident will bring his long-running martial arts show, the Oriental World of Self Defense, back to Madison Square Garden on January 16th for what will be his 358th staged karate event. The three-hour show will kick off at 2 p.m. at the Garden's 5,000-seat theater.

"They say miracles can happen," said Banks who last performed the show at Madison Square Garden in 1984.

"And the feeling now is the same feeling I had when I first went into this place in 1972. I had to prove it back then like I'm proving it now."

Banks, a 10th degree red/black belt, has been proving it for over 30 years with the Oriental World of Self Defense, which has been performed at venues all over the world including a legendary series of sold-out shows at Madison Square Garden's main 20,000-seat arena back in the mid-1970s.

While aside from Banks, the line-up in the Oriental World of Self-Defense has changed completely, the mix of martial arts demonstrations, hand-to-hand and foot-to-foot combat and old-fashioned karate thrills and chills is the same.

Some of the highlights of the eclectic new line-up include a performance by Maurice Elmalem, whom Banks describes as "a martial arts daredevil."

"He holds the world record for breaking 90 slabs of glass with his hands in one shot and he's going to try for 100 this time," Banks said.

"But it's dangerous. The glass could splinter off and hit an artery. It's nothing life-threatening but when you talk about 100 pieces of glass, it's a possibility."

Elmalem is also planning to leap through a hoop of fire and then sail over 15 people and break a board in mid-air, with a flying side kick at the end.

"People think he's out of his mind," Banks said. "But Houdini was out of his mind and this guy is the Houdini of the martial arts."

Also performing at the January 16th show will be John Drames, whom Banks touts as "the incredible master breaker of all time." Drames, who is the "world champion" of breaking stuff, is planning to chop his way through a veritable wall of cinder blocks and concrete slabs with his bare hands.

Also in the "breaking" category in the



Kung fu master Aaron Banks

Oriental World of Self Defense, will be Rico Mercado, whom Banks describes as the "ultimate in headbreaking." At a previous show at Madison Square Garden, Mercado astounded the audience by breaking 50 boards with his head at one time. This time around, he will use his noggin to break bricks and concrete slabs, Banks said.

"There's no one like him," Banks noted. "He's an ex-Marine. He's got a leather brain, I guess."

In a completely different vein, Bill Louie, from China, will perform a one-act play as the "reincarnation of Bruce Lee." Louie will don the chauffeur's uniform Bruce Lee wore in his break-out role of "Cato," the martial arts sidekick of famed TV crimefighter "The Green Hornet," for a performance of Lee-inspired karate moves.

The show will also feature a series of competitions including the lightweight and middleweight kickboxing championship matches, kickboxing versus boxing, karate versus kung fu, judo versus wrestling and man versus woman in a variety of martial arts forms. Demonstrations of aikido, jujitsu, the African martial arts form of maasi and the Brazilian dance/self-defense technique of caperia will also be included in the show, Banks added.

Banks, who will serve as master of ceremonies, will perform his own version of "skeet shooting" during the show in which he breaks boards in mid-air with slicing karate chops.

At age 71, this super senior has clearly not lost his enthusiasm for the martial arts nor his karate touch.

"I'm doing this to show that people

who are seniors can still do it," he said. "I'm 71, but I don't feel it and the reason is that martial arts is my life."

Banks brags that the Oriental World of Self Defense, which in recent years has been performed at the Nassau Coliseum, Roseland, the Beacon Theater, Queens College and the Variety Boy's and Girl's Club in Long Island City, has been running "longer than CATS."

"Even if I was 30 years old or 20 years old, you got to go out and prove it again," he said. "But age shouldn't stop anybody. It's important to be active. Being deactivated is like rolling over."

Tickets for the January 16th performance of the Oriental World of Self Defense at the Theater at Madison Square Garden range in price from \$15 to \$50. For more information call 718-896-0456.