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Marty and Jane Abo share a laugh in their home's playful phone booth

WOODS
THREE DAYS THAT ROCK

The Wacky
& Wonderful

WORLD OF ABO

A Cherry Hill couple create a home like no other (and when we say no other, we're not kidding)

By Sally Friedman

Welcome to the world of Abo. Welcome to trompe l'oeil (fool-the-eye) illusions, to unexpected accessories that instantly elicit a giggle. It's a happily zany world where humor dominates, and something quirky lies around every corner.

Jane and Marty Abo are the George Burns and Gracie Allen of the domestic scene, a perfectly matched team with a unified sense of whimsy and humor that suggests they were, indeed, meant for each other.

While their home decor is definitely not run-of-the-mill, the Abos are thoughtful people with serious jobs and life commitments. They simply decided to let themselves have fun with their home, to forget the "rules" and just live out their delightfully humorous sensibilities. Their remarkable home makes it clear that conventionality just isn't their vibe.

Marty Abo talks fast, thinks fast, laughs easily and is totally at home in a home where the outdoors and indoors are juxtaposed and where the ordinary is out to lunch. "We like things lighthearted, and we like to mix things up," says Abo, an SJ CPA with a specialty in forensic accounting. "If you can't laugh, what's the point?"

Abo gets those laughs in a home that is like no other, not just in their Cherry Hill neighborhood, but arguably almost anywhere.

Jane met Marty, unmistakably a man with a New York state of mind – and accent – when she was in college. Tiny, vivacious and almost always described as "adorable," Jane fell for the funny guy with the instant wit. Marty fell hard for the pixie who also had a penchant for theater. ▶

Photos by David Michael Howarth



Zany
objects
can be
found at
every turn
in the
Cherry Hill
home

(Top) A Cadillac couch is parked in the living room; (Middle) A custom-built table and high-back chairs give the dining room drama; (Bottom) One corner of the kitchen is decorated like a bistro



After just a year, they were engaged, and the two made local history in 1977 when they were the first couple to be married at the then-new Cherry Hill Hyatt.

“Marty was unforgettable then, and he still is,” says Jane. And Marty, in a totally serious moment, insists that “Jane Meisler Abo is the finest of the finest on this earth.”

The two settled in SJ, initially in a Maple Shade apartment that was, they agree, “normal.” Later, they moved to a home in Cherry Hill that was tilting toward the funky – but not in an extreme way.

When a spec home came on the market because a potential buyer turned it down when he wasn’t crazy about its contemporary look, the Abos knew they’d found their blank canvas. The open feel of the house – its expansiveness and lush treed lot – made it the perfect place to truly make their own.

“I love things that look a bit crumbly,” says Jane. That is evident in one of the home’s most surprising features: a two-story entry wall of faux painted bricks that are perfectly imperfect. Just like real life.

Jane and a student artist from Cherry Hill East, where Jane is the official greeter/student supervisor, spent weeks planning and months implementing the actual pattern of the interior wall that looks for all the world like an exterior one. “Beautiful wasn’t the goal – realistic was,” says Jane.

The entire entryway was transformed into what seems an outdoor courtyard, with awnings and shuttered windows with flower pots. It all creates the distinct feeling that you may have slipped down the rabbit hole and ended up outdoors after all. But just when you think you’ve figured it all out, there’s more to process.

Why is a phone ringing in an indoor phone booth, and why is Jane answering that phone? It’s because her mother, who had some home design startle genes of her own, had planted the booth in her own home and then gifted it to her daughter and





son-in-law. Jane and Marty, not ever above a visual joke turned real, keep it operating.

Nearby, more confusion. Is that a working traffic light in this hallway? It is. And who is that old woman in a bandana – oops, make that a mannequin – just hanging out nearby?

The Abos are accustomed to the surprise factor that keeps visitors doing double takes – and then dissolving into laughter. While they're used to the sofa in the living room that fits between the fins of a classic Cadillac convertible and the miniature piano that serves as a coffee table, most others find all that surprising.

While the homeowners admit their own childhoods were spent in conventional homes, the Abos two grown sons, Ben and Zach, had a far different experience. They brought their friends into a home so full of sight gags and zany objects that house tours provide a day's entertainment.

How many kids could boast a family room with one of its major features a cluster of glass-topped coffee tables with three impressively large Sumo wrestlers as bases? In the same room, a reindeer hanging on a wall bursts into conversation and song



Light-hearted graffiti fills the bathroom walls; (Above) Fun decor lightens up the chore of doing laundry



when motion is detected.

Even pillows on the sectional sofa where the family's three dogs hang out are zany. Huge polka dots reign here – not tapestry or sedate stripes.

Given Jane's penchant for buying store fixtures, not the merchandise, ("I never hesitate to ask...") guests also encounter objects like the curvaceous mannequin in a red clingy dress which serves as a lamp base.

Then there's the Abo kitchen where a plaster, supersized chef occupies one corner and prompts a story from Marty about buying it from a surprised restaurant owner in New York. (He then had to figure out how to get it

home.)

Ultimately, the chef rode in the couple's beloved VW Beetle convertible with the top down. Oh yes – that Beetle's headlights are adorned with long, sexy eyelashes.

(Top) The pink, girly guest room gives visitors a reason to smile; (Above left) A huge safe serves as Jane's dresser in the master bedroom; (Above right) The Abos' sense of humor is evident on a sign in the kitchen

Cabinet pulls, chez Abo, are actually repurposed hardware store spigots. A neon arrow points down to the trashcan. The whimsy goes on and on in this SJ fun house...minus the crazy mirrors.

But life is not just fun and games. Jane is passionate about family, and is known for hosting a Passover Seder with an eclectic guest list that includes one of her closest friends, a former nun.

Such events are held in the home's dining room, which boasts a table custom-designed for Jane's diminutive height by being lowered several inches. Around the perimeter of the table is a message designed to tease nosy guests who love to know what things cost: "Very expensive table" it reads. Its high-back chairs add a touch, not of humor, but of design drama.

The home's bedrooms continue the wink-and-nod mood. Zach's room was painstakingly set up as a restaurant, and nearby, the laundry area is deliberately right out in the open, incorporated into the interior landscape. Jane's nasty thoughts about being the family laundress are incorporated in irreverent signs.

In a home with so many showstoppers, the guest room may just take the grand prize. And it prompts another story, this one from Jane, who tells of a trip to Ikea for a bargain table that ended up with the impulsive purchase of a very expensive round bed.

The Abos were then off and running, creating a zany guest room with a motif of *zaftig* (ample) women cavorting in a wallpaper border, and a gigantic bra and panties as wall decor. In a largely male household, Jane went for lots of pink, lots of frou-frou and netting – and a big smile. "Why not have a little fun?" she asks with an impish grin.

Jane recalls the laughs that came in a steady stream as she and a friend decorat-



The Abos spent months making the foyer resemble an outdoor courtyard; (Below) Eye-catching fabrics are found throughout the home



“I like to think that our home is warm, welcoming and definitely a bit unusual. And if it’s fun – well, that’s a bonus, isn’t it?”

A tongue-in-cheek mural elicits laughs in the bathroom; (Right) An old – but still working – payphone can be found in the home; (Below) Even the kitchen is filled with whimsical touches



ed the master bedroom with a huge safe that serves as her dresser, and framed a swath of wallpaper as if it were an old master's painting. They even signed it, as Picasso or Degas might.

Lest anyone think that the Abos are only out for laughs, rest assured both have a serious side. They worry about the larger world, their community, their family and the future.

Marty works with the New Jersey Supreme Court's Office of Attorney Ethics, serving on its ethics committee. He is a frequent lecturer for the United States Securities and Exchange Commission. He is extremely sensitive to the strains and pressures that have lingered like unwelcome house guests during the global recession. "The mood," he says, "has been very down for a very long time."

No wonder, then, that Jane and Marty delight in other people's delight at their unconventional decorating style. "I like to think," says Jane, "that our home is warm, welcoming and definitely a bit unusual. And if it's fun – well, that's a bonus, isn't it?" ■

