

JUGGLE Magazine

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CIRCUS CONTRAPTION

SURREAL

CIRCUS

*Come to the circus
while you can -*

*We've got a grand
disaster plan...*

Take these snappy lyrics, add a giant bug, a ping pong ball match set in a shooting gallery, an enthusiastic bunch of jugglers, clowns, caterwaulers, and aerialists, and a Seattle city bus painted red, and you might come up with Circus Contraption. That's what co-founders Lara Paxton and David Crellin did when they launched this outrageously quirky and royally entertaining conglomeration of salubrious circus and musical mania. Aerialist/artistic director Paxton started the company, which she describes as "a performance art troupe based on the art of circus," in 1998. Musical director/performer Crellin, former front man for the band Phineas Gage, hopped aboard the following year as Armitage Shanks. This year's cast includes the duo Acrophelia (Evelyn Bittner and Jason Williams), Harold Smaudi, "terminal accordionist," and jugglers Ernesto Cellini and Nova Jo Yaco.

While it's true that Circus Contraption began as a satirical take on

traditional circus acts (*Do mimes make you queasy? Their silence uneasy?*), these troupers are dead serious about knocking 'em dead--if not each other--with Pythonesque comedy sketches and polished skill acts. Imagine watching *Moulin Rouge*, Chicago's *Midnight Circus*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, and a Tom Lehrer concert simultaneously and you might come close to capturing the dervish fun and devilish antics of Circus Contraption.

So what's a nice juggler to do? Join the show, of course! Just ask the troupe's star juggler, Colin Ernst, aka Ernesto Cellini. "That's my name flipped around and italianated," explained Cellini over a cell phone from Catalina Island in California, where Circus Contraption was touring last August. Cellini retraced the path that has led him to satirical-circus stardom.

Cellini's first inspiration was juggler Tash Wesp, a former Pickle Family Circus performer now based in Newport, Oregon. Back in the early 90's, Cellini, then Ernst, was making his way through the city of Prague, absorbing the atmosphere and striving to improve his show. "Tash Wesp was the first performer I saw in the street that inspired me in Prague," he recalled. "She was doing her Mildred character and alternating with Jas from Amsterdam and I was watching...WOW! So I introduced myself and offered to show them Prague, and they took me to a juggling convention off the northern tip of Holland." From there, it was not long before he fell in with IJA member Brady Bradshaw.

"I got Brady's kid to finish his dinner, and they joked, 'you're hired' -- but I called them on it and went with them as a nanny to Belgium, where we rented a gym in Antwerp with a bunch of Dutch and Belgian jugglers and practiced all day." When the exotic nanny gig came to an end, Ernst returned to Prague and stayed until the summer of 1995. "I put together a 25-minute show as the "Merry Monk" character, dressed up like a Monk. My hat line was, 'money, food, cigarettes, anything!' Europeans actually do that, but Americans aren't very creative where money is concerned." It wasn't long, however, before he started encountering political obstacles in Prague. "At first, it was cheap and easy to get a permit," he said. Later, it became more difficult and the quality of the pitches plummeted. Ernst has fond memories of attending the EJC festival in Hagen. He cites his time in Europe as most influential and claims that the European scene is more conducive to "character-driven, relationship-oriented" pieces.

After a trip to the Swedish juggling convention in Gothenburg, Ernst returned to his old stomping ground in New York City. Bradshaw, too, had returned to the U. S. and was based in Rhode Island. In return for painting Bradshaw's van, Ernst took advantage of the opportunity to drive the van to the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, where he scored participation as a street performer. From there, he ended up on an extended road trip dead-ending in Seattle, where

he had once visited relatives as a child. He took classes with juggling/movement artist Jennifer Miller at Circus Camp in Arlington, WA and attended workshops by Wise Fool, a San Francisco puppetry troupe. Ernst settled down in Seattle and took a break from performing.

Until...he met Seattle jugglers James Jay and Gary Luke. The trio practiced club-passing in a space organized by Lara Paxton, who was in the process of conceiving Circus Contraption—voilà, three men and an aerialist. At first, the troupe performed mainly in Seattle. As in the early days of the Pickle Family Circus, there was a community feel to the group on stage and off. Gradually, Circus Contraption's original style drew a local following and it wasn't long before the troupe was expanding their bookings to other western regions and raising funds for a bus. Their present touring vehicle is a re-painted Seattle Metro bus. Says the versatile Cellini, "I'm the metal worker in the group, so I welded the internal structure and a truck with supportive gear in it. Our first truck died." Did somebody mention a disaster plan?

Cellini briefly collaborated with Circus Contraption in 1998 and ran into the troupe the following year at the Seattle Fringe Festival, where he presented his solo show, *The Adventures of the Merry Monk and Frog Prince Teddy*. He recalls that New York's Bindlestiff Family Circus was a great inspiration to Circus Contraption, which also offers a mix of family and adult (i.e. raunchy) entertainment. "Everyone talked about touring, but the Bindlestiffs were actually doing it," he said. After Gary Luke and James Jay left the troupe in the fall of 2001 to pursue other performance opportunities (Jay is now performing in Berlin), Cellini picked up the ball(s) for Circus Contraption and continued the act solo.

Cellini says his loneliness as a soloist inspired the concept for his current 6-minute act. At one point, he juggles a doll and ends by flipping it up to a high chair balanced on his chin while juggling three clubs. He performs umbrella-and-ball tricks, juggles traffic cones in original combinations, rides a swing bike, performs four clubs and is working on five. He has a one and two diabolo act up his sleeve and has used his welding skills to fashion his own set and prop stand.

Today, Circus Contraption consists 12 performers who's multiple disguises and edgy humor make them seem like a band of escaped truants bent on conquering the establishment. Incredibly, they are succeeding: a recent run of "Eat Circus," part of Contraption's summer tour, played Denver's Bug Theater (yes) to SRO crowds, standing ovations, and impressive media coverage. The troupe is returning for Halloween shows with mambo band Cabaret Diosa at the Aggie Theatre in Fort Collins on Oct. 31, the Boulder Theatre on Nov. 1, and Denver's Ogden Theatre Nov. 2 (all shows at 10pm). Back in Seattle, the troupe co-hosts Open Juggling through the winter with

Washington's affiliate, the Cascade Jugglers. The weekly Saturday meetings take place at Circus Contraption's home space, "Workshop 30," at the Sand Point naval base in northeast Seattle. For upcoming shows and workshops, visit www.circuscontraption.com.

Circus Contraption now has a second juggler in the cast: Jenny Iacobucci, aka Nova Jo Yaco, manipulates hats with flapper-like agility in the context of a four-woman character dance ensemble. Yaco is not the only female juggler on board: Lara Paxton's 11-year-old daughter, Feather, has been known to perform a diabolo act in the show. As the lyrics accompanying her mother's sinuous trapeze act state:

I ran away from home

And the circus led me to roam... Whether Circus Contraption's performers are playing Scott Joplin tunes on beer bottles, juggling their vaudevillian roles, doubling as singers and instrumentalists, or just horsing around like kids in the basement, the effect is the same. Circus Contraption makes me want to laugh and scream and cheer and fight...for CIRCUS!

*Cindy Marvell,
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