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JUGGLING MAGIC AND HISTORY

LAZER VAUDEVILLE GIVES AN OLD FORM A NEW LOOK

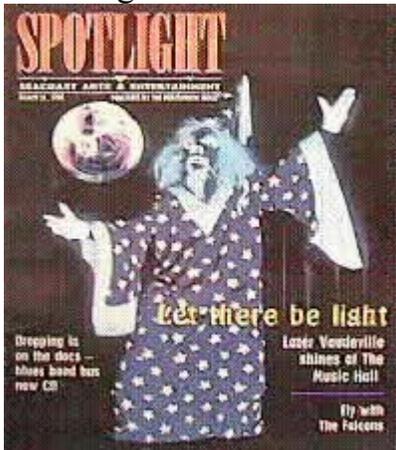
By Kevin Farley

SPOTLIGHT CORRESPONDENT

If you were one of the hundreds of people turned away from Lazer Vaudeville's shows at The Music Hall during First Night Portsmouth 1996, your chance for redemption has come. The group is bringing its stunning combination of high-tech laser magic, and the traditional vaudeville arts of juggling, acrobatics, zany comedy and audience participation back to The Music Hall for one show at 3 p.m. on Sunday, March 31.

Carter Brown, the group's founder, is excited about bringing an expanded version of the New Year's show back to Portsmouth. "Portsmouth is our kind of town," he said in a recent interview, "an active downtown with a restored vaudeville house. And the audiences on New Year's Eve were absolutely fantastic." The Music Hall itself is also an attraction to Brown and his cast mates: "Vaudeville comes back to the vaudeville house. There's a certain magic knowing the old vaudevillians performed there; I can almost feel their ghosts

watching the show."



The show fulfills Brown's dream of "diving into history to pull an art form out of the grave." His background includes stints with the Ringling Brothers and Carden International Circuses and the Monte Carlo Festival du Cirque, as well as solo tours of South America, Canada and Japan. He brings a strong sense of history to his work, tracking down old films of his heroes and speaking with reverence of his encounters with such juggling legends as Kit Summers and Homer Stack.

Since forming Lazer Vaudeville in 1987, Brown has been committed to energizing his art with new technologies and original methods of presentation. "When I started the show, I was fed up with the lack of creativity in circus acts and vaudeville in general," he says. "I really wanted to see it combined with the lighting effects and technology of the 90's."

The result is a show which encompasses everything from traditional juggling with such diverse objects as plungers, machetes and running chainsaws, to a masterful demonstration of the lost art of hoop rolling. The troupe creates pinwheel illusions and percussive sounds with South American bolas, bounces balls off airborne drums in a mesmerizing ensemble piece, kicks up a luminescent rope-spinning display, and uses flying black light sticks in a piece called "Geospheres."

These death-defying feats are mingled with such silliness as a chef named Julia Childish teaching plate spinning to a young audience member, and various tricks involving more conventional fixtures like straitjackets, pie tossing, acrobatics and slapstick. They are all performed with a decidedly surreal bent, and presided over by the master of ceremonies—a seven-foot tall, fluorescent, fire-breathing dragon named Alfonzo. "Kids are used to video and film, so they really respond to this," Brown says. "Part of our mission is to introduce young

audiences to the art of live performance."

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The Centerfold of the Weekend Section

Brown comes from a theatrical family. Raised in New York City by his set-designer father and actress/dancer mother, he began performing at the age of eight. During a stint as director of the University of Vermont's mime troupe, The Silent Company, he picked up the basics of juggling and moved on to Ringling's Clown College.

It was during his road days with the circus that he found his niche as the premier revivalist of hoop juggling, a dying art which features the rolling and manipulation of antique bicycle rims. "The rims are hard to find these days," Brown says, "and this act is rarely performed because of the space it requires."

During his time with Carden International Circus, Brown became interested in the use of technology to enhance the presentation of his art. He eventually developed innovations in sound and lighting, which were successful enough to encourage him to pursue the vision behind Lazer Vaudeville.

In addition to the mainstream juggling tradition, Brown's influences include "movement art" innovators, ranging from Mummenschanz and the Famous People Players, to recent MacArthur "genius grant" winner Michael Moschen and The Flying Karamazov Brothers. "We're taking it a step further into the realm of high-tech," he says, "pulling a lot of elements in." Brown's partners in his endeavor bring the same rich diversity of skills and background to the

group.



Cindy Marvell, also a native New Yorker, is the first woman to win the International Juggling Association's Championship. At age 15, she became the youngest student ever admitted to SUNY Purchase's Antic Arts Academy, and moved on to San Francisco's Pickle Family Circus, and eventually worked solo in the Far East. She brings her background in dance to the mix, adding elements of modern choreography to the group's routines. "The technical level we perform at is very high," she says, "but we try to explore the frontiers of the art in a way that still appeals to kids and entralls adults."

Jeff Taub, an acrobat and comedian, is also a graduate of Ringling Clown College. The Louisiana native studied theatre from a young age and, after his stint on the road with the circus, pursued his interest in theatrical design at the Dell'Arte School of Physical Theatre in Blue Lake, California. His background in mask making and design brings an additional dimension to Lazer Vaudeville, and he works constantly to develop innovations in props and costumes for the show.

Besides presenting over 150 theatre shows a year, Lazer Vaudeville offers an Arts-in-Education Outreach program designed to bring live performances to schools. "We teach kids about the history of vaudeville in America," Taub says. "Most of them can't imagine life before TV or movies, when vaudeville was the staple of popular entertainment."

Lazer Vaudeville's base of operations is Brown's 100-year-old house in Ocala, Fla., which has been renovated to include office and rehearsal space. Here the group creates and develops its material and runs the complex business of

booking and travel arrangements, as well as designing and building the equipment and props essential for the show. But in spite of the logistical and technical demands, the group stays focused on its goal of presenting its ideas in human terms.

"Many people are drawn to the show because of the lasers and black light effects," says Marvell, "but, especially for the kids, it's still the human touch that counts."

The first 15 minutes of Lazer Vaudeville's show are in black light, so latecomers cannot be admitted during this part. Attendees are asked to allow themselves time to be seated before the show begins at 3 PM.

Lazer Vaudeville will perform at The Music Hall, 28 Chestnut St., Portsmouth, on Sunday, March 31 at 3 PM. Tickets are \$8.50 in advance, \$10 at the door, and are available at the box office, 436-2400 or through Ticket-master, 626-5000.