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Moschen Explores Shape of Juggling

By CINDY MARVELL

It is Sunday, August 1. The Niagara Festival has just ended, and all the juggling has been packed up and spirited away. In order to avoid the usual post-festival letdown, we have just driven from Buffalo to Lenox, Mass., to see a juggling show. This will have to fill a tremendous void, coming as it does fewer than 24 hours after the I.J.A. Public Show. Only an unparalleled artist from a parallel universe could follow this weeklong act: Michael Moschen in concert at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival.

That Moschen, and in the past the Alchemedians and Airjazz, have found acceptance here is in itself a significant development for the art of juggling. Founded by Ted Shawn and company, the Pillow presents dance companies and choreographers like David Parsons and Janis Brenner, Moschen's longtime choreographer. Yet the Pillow's doors have remained open to new vaudevillians, viewed by the management as "pioneers" of movement art. As Suzanne Carbonneau writes in a program essay on Moschen's work as a juggler, "What better metaphor for the ultimate nobility of human beings—our ability to fly in the face of experience in order to wrest transcendence from long odds."

In this case, the odds are that we will be impressed, perhaps depressed, but ultimately transfixed by the presence of a gently overwhelming genius who never lets his ideals out of his grasp. On the way to the mainstage space, we encounter an exhibit of photographs by Peter Angelo Simon, a follower of Moschen's work and career, taken in the late 1970's. "These pictures show Michael's extraordinary centeredness while performing," he writes, "He seems to organize the space around him. He is like the eye of the storm."

Inside the theatre, "Light" is about to take shape. A summer breeze sends the curtain rippling outwards, and behind it Moschen has already begun. An unearthly blue reflection casts ripples of light on the stage. The curtain rises to reveal Moschen facing the audience and kneeling, focusing intently on four crystal balls rotating in each hand, the only other motion a

gentle swaying of the body. Snatches of birdsong flit around this image of a man at peace yet constantly searching, gently exploring. Working his way down to a single contemplative sphere, Moschen seems poised to host a Japanese tea ceremony, introducing his audience to the illusory world of shapes and rhythms which he so consciously and cleverly inhabits.

Methodically rising, he recedes out of the spotlight and moves on to the shape he calls the teardrop. The physical properties of nature gradually unfold as Moschen uses the shape to conjure strangely familiar longings. As Moschen has often stated, he seeks to liberate the patterns of movement inherent in the objects themselves without losing the humanity of the juggler as a marked individual contending with the forces of the universe. Watching him twirl, manipulate, and caress an object, you might just as easily form tears yourself.

After replacing the prop in its stand, Moschen looks across the stage towards what appears to be the juggler's moon, a large crescent hanging on a string. Alighting on the floor, the crescent rolls around him like a giant melon rind or the rib of a ship. Moschen lets a ball roll on the crescent, and finally sits down to observe the interaction of shapes he has set in motion. They will continue for a time without him, like a child's top after it has been dropped, yet without the child it is just a lonely prop awaiting the juggler's return.

As the music takes an upbeat turn, balls roll across the stage in a staggered line. Soon a ball is rolling on Moschen's stomach as he breathes, a reminder that all movement and gesture begin with breath, with the muscles around the solar plexus. The ball rolls into a chin catch, a perfect intro to the most classically vaudeville segment of the show. Wearing striped pants and white jazz shoes, Moschen manages to use his famous intensity to play his own straight man, eliciting laughs as he reacts to his stunt people: the balls themselves. A series of head rolls leads him to the triangle, which looms like an omnipresent yet accessible peak to be explored. With the energetic grace of a taiko drummer, Moschen begins his symphony on the bounce. White silicone balls crisscross the space in increasingly complex paths, creating a web in which Moschen plays both insect and spider.

"I feel like an Olympic athlete every time I get through that triangle piece," he said after the show, and the shape does seem to alter between a trap and a zone of delightful discovery. Now and then he ducks under a ball as it appears to float overhead. When he jumps out, it is only to embrace a new form of play, a juggler's tap dance in which a ball shuffles off the soles of his shoes. The punchy ending garners a burst of applause from the captivated audience, now in essence a vaudeville crowd wondering how on

earth this is done, and whether it would work in their own kitchen.

One lucky gentleman gets an approximate idea as Moschen collaborates with a volunteer to digest an apple while juggling. It must be pointed out that this is not accomplished in the usual manner seen at your local renaissance festival; it is a way of expanding the meditation to include the entire audience, and why shouldn't they get their chance to dance, too?

The next piece on the menu, "Sticks and Vectors," though abstractly titled, plunges me into a sea of navigational and maritime imagery. The vectors, staff-sized sticks with arrows on one end, balls on the other, suggested harpoons being tossed in various configurations without actually leaving the hands of the imaginary harpooner. A supporting sculpture anchors the piece like a ship's steering wheel as Moschen launches into another exploration of the physics of space. Balancing the vectors on his face, shoulder, and foot, Moschen seems to become a giant, 3-dimensional clock. The ball becomes an extra socket from which to swing the staff, adding to the complexity of the manipulation.

"They're like stilts," says the child next to me as a shape resembling a tetrahedron of vectors joined by a single socket emerges. As Moschen rubs the shape between his hands like a puddle jumper, it seems lifted by an inner electricity as it is raised overhead. When a miniature version of the vector emerges, Moschen lunges around and above it, using it to explore variations on the larger sculptural theme, a spatially effective device that surfaces throughout the program. Often the larger shapes make an initial impact while the downsized versions give Moschen the mobility to expand upon the images.

As Act II progresses, shapes make appearances like animals, sharing the spotlight for as long or as short a time as suits their particular natures in the moment. At the outset, Moschen appears in a gray unitard in "Circles." A compass-like, isosceles shape seems to draw a circle around his feet as a striking shower of light flickers around him. The next circle, more familiar to jugglers, is the hoop he demonstrated at the Montreal Festival. This piece is accompanied by the most soulfully effective music in the show, and the hard-earned magic which floats the hoop between Moschen's fingers and around his hands while he broods and hovers artfully around it, an active observer resembling a marionette player more than a juggler, culminates in one momentous throw, an act of release all the more climactic for its singularity.

As two big hoops take the stage, the music takes a Brazilian percussive turn. By the time the truly giant hoop appears, the soundtrack has developed a circus atmosphere, which perfectly suits Moschen's subtle,

endearing buffoonery. It has been noted that Moschen has a childlike, off-balance quality whenever he goes up on his toes, a wonderful complement to the centered sureness of his spidery second-position plie. This playfulness seems to be just what this big hoop was looking for, and Moschen lets himself become comically dwarfed as the hoop eventually gathers its own momentum for an escape from control. Next follows a “mystery piece,” which Moschen would like more time to develop before it plays across the nation. Suffice it to say that it involves cylindrical shapes which rotate and swing around his hands.

Large curved shapes called “S-curves” hang from the ceiling, and once again miniature versions come into play as Moschen dances the rubbery shapes across the stage. As a transition into the final sequences, an elaborate wind chime takes center stage. Against a background of long, major chords, it twitters with joy, awakening us to the fact that it is a beautiful Sunday and the world is full of mystery, promise and unexpected joy. Lovely work with S-curves completes this chapter; Moschen has found harmony with these shapes one would not have thought possible for a representative of the angular human race.

“Fire,” breathes the child next to me, “dangerous, scary.” Yet he watches enthralled as a torch-swinging display sanctifies the space. There is music, yet what one hears most are the silences between the whooshing circles of flame. “Space is always there,” reads a quote of Doris Humphrey’s in the Pillow’s archival museum, “and there is nothing you can do about it.” It is always there for Moschen, the frontier of empty darkness waiting to be filled, even after the motion has ceased to allow for a well-earned standing ovation.

“My work is all about generating new work,” he tells some visiting Cornell jugglers after the show, advising them to pursue their own explorations of the craft. For the audience at large, his advice was much simpler: “go for a swim,” he suggested, though he would spend the rest of the afternoon packing his props and disappearing, circus-style, from the arena which seemed to exist for him alone the past fortnight.