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JUGGLE



LUKE WILSON
MODERN MANIPULATOR

JUGGLING MAGIC:

By Jerry Martin

In his 32 years on earth, Luke Wilson has accomplished some remarkable things. He has won awards in magic and in juggling. He co-created a vocabulary for club juggling technique that fosters learning and creativity in a completely new way. He has successfully brought cutting-edge modern juggling to paying audiences. He contributes to experimental juggling and manipulation with abundant skill, creative energy, and a mature respect for juggling history. *Ladies and gentlemen, mes dames et messieurs, meine Damen und Herren: Luke Wilson!*

I've never understood why there aren't more people who are passionate about both juggling and magic. Both arts reward practice and spotless timing; both can be engaging and surprising and clever, and can result in the viewer (and performer!) experiencing something wonderful. Successful acts in both fields can be theatrical, moving, or hilarious — and unforgettable.

Yet, there is a divide separating most magicians and most jugglers. The father of modern magic, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin famously wrote, "The conjuror is not a juggler. He is an actor playing the part of a magician." What about the converse — can a juggler be a conjuror? How many times have you seen a performance of jugglery that could only be described as *magical*? Still, consider why so many jugglers disdain so many magicians: all those tricks that can be *bought*, then performed with essentially no effort. They don't *earn* their chops. Or, as Luke Wilson puts it, "Knowledge shouldn't be so easy to get."

Wilson, who is one of the most versatile, intelligent, and skillful jugglers working today, actually started out in magic. As an eleven-year-old growing up in Portsmouth, on the south coast of England, his life's journey began with simple curiosity, when he redeemed a gift certificate for a book on magic. He remembers clearly how the book was really too good, revealing secrets of obviously high value — choice material that could get author Peter Eldin in hot water with other magicians! Luke soon discovered the joy of mastering difficult hand maneuvers used to control playing cards, and experienced early encouragement in junior magicians' contests. He found that he didn't particularly like performing: his satisfaction

came from accomplishing expert sleight of hand, primarily manipulating cards and coins.

Fortuitously, a friend of his Mum's owned a second-hand book shop and, knowing the young lad's interest, would set aside any magic books that came along, for his consideration. One fateful day, *Juggling for the Complete Klutz* appeared on the pile, and Luke's curiosity was piqued again. The book had been separated from its beanbags, but he was determined to learn to juggle — in the context of his world of magic, he "just assumed it was something I should know how to do." He was fourteen years old.

It took him six months to teach himself the three-ball cascade. He did *not* enjoy the learning of it, though, oddly, once he had it conquered, he found it was kind of fun. Having valued the good company, camaraderie, and challenge of the local magic club, he naturally sought out the local jugglers. When he found them, juggling clicked for him almost immediately.

Whereas in magic performing had held no appeal, he was out on the street doing comedy juggling at local fairs within his first year. He got lucky at an outdoor event at nearby Gosport, teaming up with Jamie Fletcher; the duo called themselves Passing Phase, and did shows together for three years. The fledgling buskers fed their hunger for information and inspiration with IJA Festival videotapes; their heroes were The Passing Zone, The Raspyni Brothers, Anthony Gatto, and Jeff Mason. (He cringes now at what they must have paid to have the North American tapes converted to the European PAL format back in the early '90s!) Their act eventually featured club-passing while idling on six-foot and eight-foot unicycles, and between a six-foot uni and a



Ilka Licht and Luke Wilson, known as lukaluka, circa 2002.

PHOTO: MELANIE PAWLOWSKI

A Profile of Luke Wilson

free-standing ladder. They played every street fair and school program/workshop they could find until Jamie got serious about college.

For himself, Luke found that slacking off from school to practice juggling and magic hadn't hurt his grades — on the contrary, he was doing quite well in school. He chose to drop out, spend a year honing his performance skills, and then audition for the first cohort of students in a brand new course of study at the Circus Space facility in London. The plan was blessed by his Mum and step-dad, and he was accepted into the new program. (The Circus Space program has had educational legitimacy from the beginning: CS course work earns the student credits that can be used at other schools, and the CS certificate is equivalent to a University/Bachelor's level degree.)

The Deep End of the Talent Pool

Wilson is succinct in his description of the Circus Space experience: "I did well there, because I knew what I wanted to do." After a year of general but intense stagecraft fundamentals, students could specialize in their second year. Luke opted for juggling, along with two other students: a young German woman named Ilka Licht, and "a guy called Steve." The three were taught primarily by Sean Gandini and Kati Ylä-Hökkala, a couple who had been breaking new ground by mixing dance with juggling and choreographing complex and remarkable group pieces. Luke's meeting *fräulein* Licht was life-changing in many ways: Ilka was knowledgeable about the French *nouveau cirque* scene; she knew influential artistes Jorg Müller of Germany and Mads Rosenbeck from Denmark; and "she introduced me to modern juggling. All I knew [before then] was IJA juggling." Luke and Ilka soon became partners, calling themselves *lukaluka*. [See "*lukaluka: Modern Juggling*," July/Aug 2002.]

Luke cites Gandini as the source of his understanding of choreography and creation. He singles out Dirk Van Boxelaere of Belgium and Gregor Kiock of Germany as major influences on his emerging style. At first, Luke's style featured starts and stops, wrist-traps, and experimental ideas not normally seen in commercial venues: body placements and "trappy stuff that I liked, but it wasn't really juggling." The more he stuck with it, though, the more it seemed like he could make it work. He also explored crossovers between props — for example, doing devil stick with clubs — breaking sequences up into much shorter phrases, with less throwing and more attention to making it all flow together.

One area he found particularly interesting was catching/throwing clubs by the wrong end. Luke recalls first seeing slapbacks in Jay Gilligan's IJA competition set in 1995. In a slapback, the wrong-ended incoming club is batted upwards with the back of the receiving hand, abruptly reversing its spin for a half turn and catching the handle as it snaps upwards. (Interestingly, Luke reports subsequently seeing footage of the Alegria Brothers performing the same move in a film clip from 1947!) In trying to make the wrong-way position of the props more visually obvious to the audience, Luke created "Red/Blue," an extraordinary feat of skill and showmanship that has evolved into a signature performance piece.

Its premise is almost too simple: three club-length sticks are cascaded; each is red at one end and blue at the other, and as each stick is caught, that end's color is spoken out loud. Starting with the red ends in the hands, a normal juggle would result in "red, red, red" ad infinitum, since each prop would rotate a full 360° in the air. With flat throws (a.k.a. zeroes, having 0° rotation aloft) you'd have the same result. Half-rotations of 180° introduce the ringer: the color of the caught end changes from red to blue, or blue to red. After educating the audience to this, and providing some simple examples (e.g., all half-rotation throws

to get "red, blue, red, blue, red, blue"), he goes for broke by introducing a kind of rotational siteswap: juggling the cascade as a particularly difficult sequence of consecutive rotational

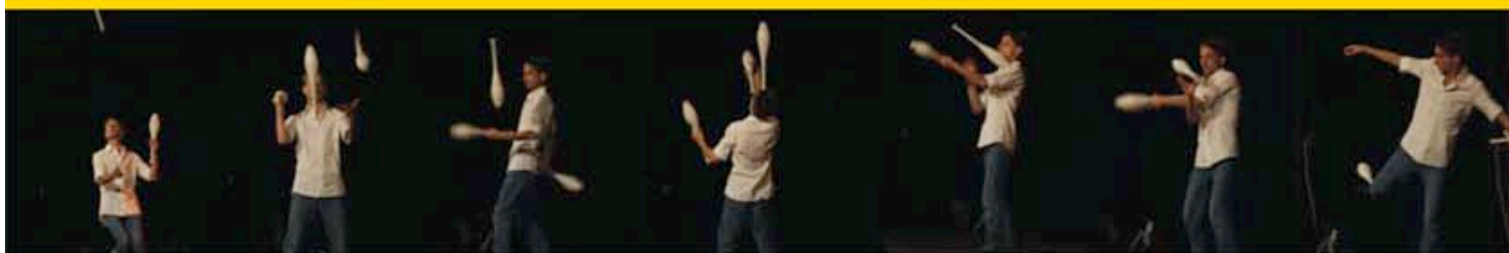


PHOTO: SEGEV SHELTON

The Red/Blue routine.

throws — flat, half, full, half, flat — repeated. Try it, if you dare, but be forewarned that you'll have to switch hands at the start of each set of five throws, so ten throws are needed for a full cycle.

Weirdly, the color configuration returns to red/red/red after fifteen successful throws. The piece has so much inherent interest that most observers can't help but watch very closely; the seemingly random monologue ("Red, blue, red, blue, blue, red...") magically matches each catch, and the sound and rhythm is mesmerizing. His reward for success is the irrepressible cheering and delighted laughter of his audience. Originally only performed for jugglers on the Renegade stage, this is actually a highly commercial routine, one he now uses regularly. Consider what a complex amalgam of his experience had to come together to bring this idea to life: sticks handled like clubs; deep exploration of wrong-end catches/corrections; vocalizing "siteswaps" real-time, in performance (a hallmark of the Gandini influence); and, ultimately, taking on a pattern so hard that it seems to defy learning, and then mastering and internalizing it completely.



New Worlds

Circus Space graduation required a performance piece, and the first graduating class of jugglers put together a trio. From there, Luke and Ilka flew to America to be part of a European showcase presented at the IJA's Fiftieth Anniversary Festival in Pittsburgh.



PHOTO: SAGEV SHULTON

Luke's unique teabag and teacup manipulation.

They turned their graduation trio into a duet, which still lives in the memory of those who saw it: fresh, lyrical, engaging, and showcasing many new ideas. Luke remembers it from another perspective: most of his IJA video idols were there in the audience, watching him! Lukaluka went on to win a special prize at the revered Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain in Paris, and developed themselves into a successful act playing the variété theater circuit in Germany for several years. They made a return visit to the IJA in Niagara Falls in 1999, debuting a trio act they wrote and performed with US juggler Greg Kennedy, who they had met during a tenure at the French National Circus School at Châlons-en-Champagne.

During this period, Luke undertook a project to expand his knowledge of technique at a juggling festival in Berlin. He had had conversations with Ben Richter (known professionally as Ben Smalls) about the apparent explosion in new club tricks, and the duo presented a workshop aimed at listing them all. Beginning with a couple of club-specific new tricks, the event quickly morphed into a group trick-share — wrist-traps and lazy catches soon begat variations, which inspired new ideas, which recalled more variations... And they realized they had stumbled onto a whole new vocabulary in club juggling that had not been previously identified or explored.

Being great believers in understanding technique by defining and systematizing it — that's how you get to talk about something, after all — they invented the Encyclopedia of Contemporary Club Juggling (EOCCJ). Their original vision was to have a website that could be appended and updated, and would be arranged in chapters in such a way that every trick would fit in some chapter. They were also insistent that this would include historical attribution(s) to the artiste(s) who originated each idea. Notational systems (e.g., siteswap) would be used or invented as needed to describe each item accurately.

The Encyclopedia soon stabilized at seven chapters (some with subheadings) and two appendices. They are:

- Chapter 1: Throws & Catches
- Chapter 2: High Low
- Chapter 3: Switch Stance ("wrong end")
- Chapter 4: Rolls & Slides
- Chapter 5: Swings & Loops
- Chapter 6: Placements
- Chapter 7: Balances
- Appendix 1: Brain Busters & Games
- Appendix 2: Stage Drops

Luke offers a sample: "'High Low' refers to throwing a club high — say, a quad — and then using the time it's aloft to insert something else down low — say, fast double spins with the other two clubs. The parenthetical example given here was, 'First realized by Sergei Ignatov (Russia), and was taken in new directions by Sean McKinney and Jay Gilligan (US), among others: throwing two high and jumping over the third club, one high with two treblas, 423 variations, 522 variations, and so on.' (A "trebla" is a reverse "albert" — a club is thrown under the leg from back to front, keeping the foot grounded.)"

Luke also notes, "A 'Brain Buster' (Appendix 1) is my bowdlerization of a popular European term that refers to juggling feats that fail if you think about them."

Two things became apparent almost immediately. One was the enormous amount of crossover — so many moves easily fit into multiple categories. The other was that using the categories turned out to be much more interesting than actually annotating them. Ben and Luke have become EOCCJ missionaries, leading numerous workshops at festivals ever

since, acting as a kind of living document — or walking repositories — of club juggling technique. It doesn't hurt, of course, that between the two of them they can actually demonstrate nearly every club move there is!

Today, the EOCCJ is a tool of teaching and creation, and not the archive they originally envisaged. As Jon Held advised: "Find those little cracks that interest you and pry them open and widen them up so that others can follow and be enriched by your boldness."

Making Lemonade

Lukaluka dissolved their partnership in 2005; Ilka and Luke continue to enjoy a close friendship. The professional transition from being half of a known-quantity duo act to being marketed as a solo talent has been difficult; although they both now had contacts in the business, each needed to offer something new.

In Luke's case, this has been straightforward. He has ongoingly experimented with solo juggling ideas, and has a lot of material available for creating/assembling an act or two. Also, he notes that "going solo means being able to pursue new projects."

One rather unexpected source of work has been teaching. There is an advanced juggling program at the Danhögskolan University of Dance in Stockholm called "Juggling and Music." Each course runs five months, offered by their Neo Circus Department — in English — and may be taken for credit. There are very few qualified teachers at this level, so despite a narrow market, there are opportunities. Luke created the course with Jay Gilligan; they also wrote the curriculum, and are team teaching the inaugural spring 2009 course. Incidentally, this is the same school Wes Peden has been attending, and Wes is one of their students! How cool is that?

Luke has been keeping his artistic juices flowing in other ways, too. He has been involved in the seminal and very contemporary Manipulation Research Laboratory projects. Organized by Jay Gilligan, the MRL collective includes Wilson, Ben Smalls, and Eric Åberg of Sweden, along with other students of the "less throwing" school of experimental juggling. Their structured improvisation DVDs offer fascinating glimpses of gifted artistic jugglers pursuing new horizons together.



And, yes, there has been space in Luke's new solo career for magic and comedy. He has been engaged as a compere (emcee), incorporating short magic or juggling bits as needed, and he has been doing some strolling close-up magic for well-funded corporate events. He's still interested in the variety stage, but solo male jugglers are hard to sell these days. Undaunted, he has been writing a full evening show with magician Ken Bardowicks. Titled *Bis einer Heult (It'll All End in Tears)*, it's a combination of solo and duo pieces, showcasing the players' skills in comedy theatrics, as well as their own idiosyncratic works.

Additionally, Luke has developed a seven-minute silent act of card manipulations, and a tight nine-minute speaking act — in German — in which five signed selected playing

cards appear in impossible locations. Although there has been some resistance by agents to book a card act in theatrical venues, this form of entertainment is actually very continental, drawing on the 19th Century Viennese tradition

of Johann Nepomuk Hofzinsler, who hit it big by bringing elegant parlor magic to the music halls. Luke Wilson — a juggler's juggler — is perfect for this role: playing the part of a magician, he takes the stage and captivates the imaginations of 300 spectators using only a pack of cards, his wit, and the necessary subterfuge. You see, because he's a purist — and in this context, that's just another word for "juggler" — his routine involves no faked cards or easy outs: merely a second deal, a bluff shift, a spread pass, a riffle pass, three one-handed top palms, an Erdnase top palm, and lots of double undercuts. Magicians call this kind of work "knuckle busting." And, because he's practiced each move to perfection, and executes them at just the right time, you won't see any of them — sorry. What you will see is... magic! ●

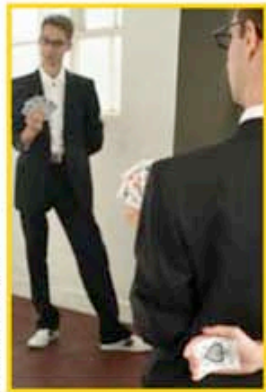


PHOTO: MATT HENNEM

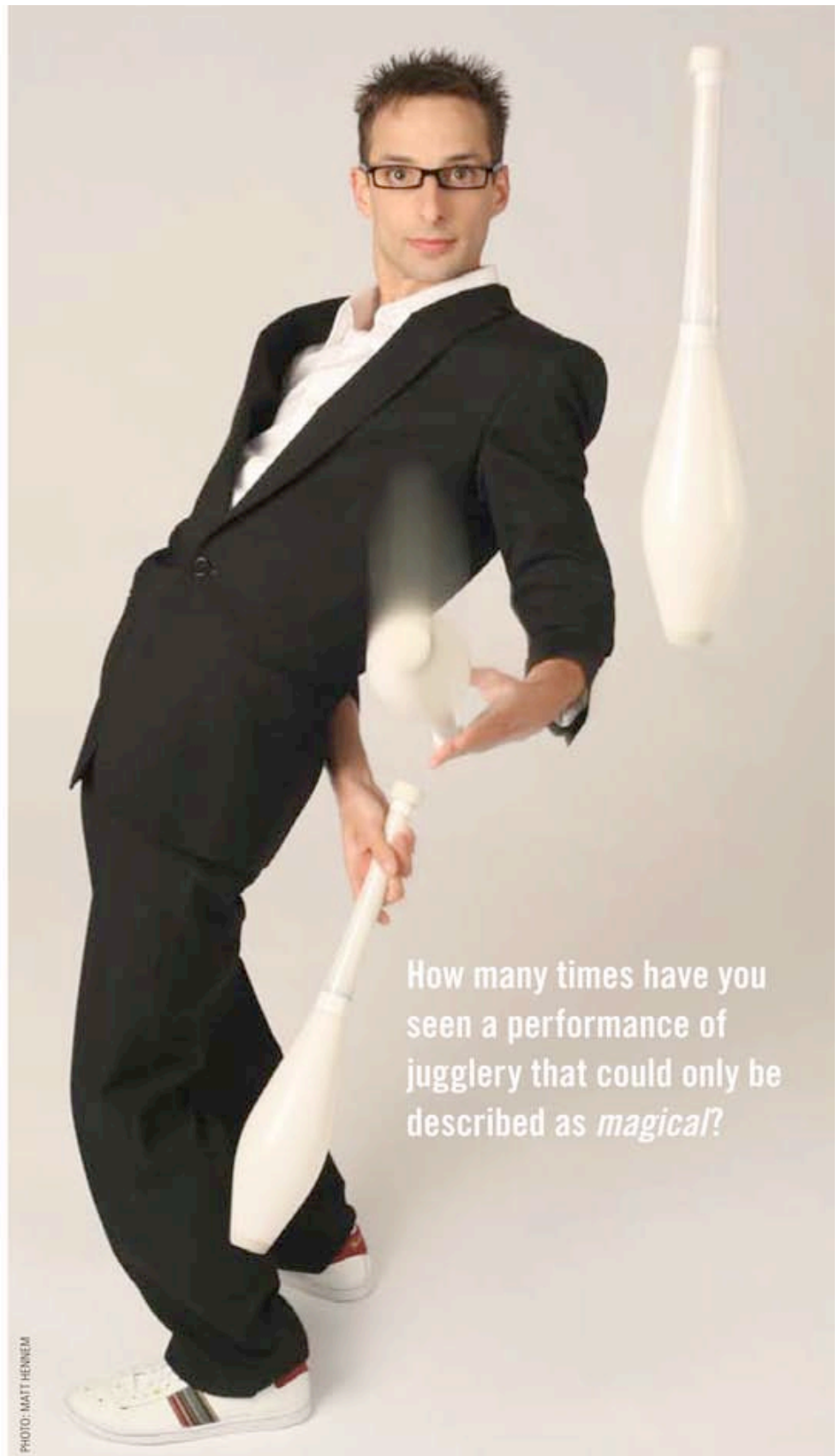
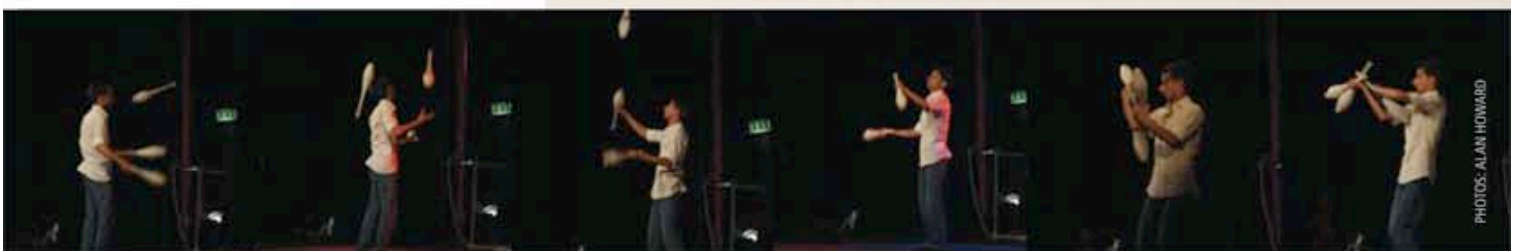


PHOTO: MATT HENNEM

How many times have you seen a performance of jugglery that could only be described as *magical*?



PHOTOS: ALAN HOWARD