

The Official Magazine of the International Juggler's Association

November/December 2004

JUGGLE

A juggler in a black tuxedo with a white shirt and bow tie is shown in a dynamic, low-to-the-ground pose. He is balancing a long, thin yellow stick on his nose. A white ball is perched on the stick, just above the juggler's head. The stick extends diagonally upwards towards the top of the frame. The background is a solid, deep blue.

Jeton
A Modern Gentleman

Hello!

HERE'S JETON!



By Alan Howard

As the sound of an old jazz tune by the Dave Brubeck Quartet fills the air, an aristocratic dandy strides sedately from the wings to the spotlight at center stage. Smartly attired in a tuxedo and bowler, the toff commences to fill the air in his own manner, tossing the derby along with his walking cane and pocket handkerchief. A coin is placed on the end of the cane, then deftly flicked into his eye socket, where it is worn as a monocle. The cane, with the hat placed atop it, is balanced on his foot, then launched upward to be caught balanced on the cigar in his mouth.

While it seems as though you might be witnessing these moments via the magic of film, capturing a performance from some 70 years ago, this act is in fact being done live, right now, in the 21st century. The performer is Jeton, one of the few gentleman jugglers of modern times.

Created in the late 1800s by juggling luminaries such as Kara and Salerno, the gentleman style presented juggling as if done by the master of a private mansion. Tuxedoed artistes worked intricate manipulations with such objects as might be found in their drawing room — hats, umbrellas, billiard balls and cues, lamps, and most anything that could be found upon a dining table. Over the years, audiences responded favorably to work with such familiar objects, yet the gentleman genre faded along with the era of such gentlemen themselves, to be seen only occasionally since World War II.

"I never saw a gentleman juggler," Jeton says, but he was inspired to pursue that course after reading stories about them. "From the beginning I was fascinated with those ideas — putting an act into a story, into a scene, and using objects that everybody has touched before. People will understand the whole thing differently when you use a common object. Like using a club — no private person has had a club in their hand; they don't know what it means. But if they see objects like a cane, or a cigar and a top hat, those are objects they can imagine. You do a juggling feat like balancing the cane on the foot and throwing it up and catching it on the cigar in a balance, that's amazing to them. It's something they can relate to."

Not only does the audience not expect unusual moves with common objects, but current jugglers rarely experiment with such items. "I think nobody does it anymore because it's not so easy to do it," says Jeton. "There are so many good jugglers out there... Numbers juggling is so popular, they practice so much, and they could learn other stuff, too, if they put the effort in. But you have to build the props. Sometimes you need months, years, and a couple bucks to build the props to finally get something that is working for you. It's much easier for most of the jugglers to go to a shop and buy some clubs, some balls, and learn from some videos. Much easier."

Jeton can make this statement with authority, since naturally he started out with the more standard jugglers props himself.

Jens Thorwächter — his real name — first came upon juggling while in school. Born in Frankfurt, Germany in 1970, Jens was about 14 when his school had a variety and circus workshop. He started out learning some magic tricks, but found them boring. His temperament was suited to

The cane with hat kicked to a balance on the cigar, the first trick Arthur Caral taught Jeton.

something much more active, a skill that would let him move. The myriad possibilities of juggling were just what he needed.

From the school workshop Jens learned of juggling meetings in Frankfurt, and went every day to practice with other jugglers at a local park. After high school, in 1991, he attended the national circus school of Belgium, located in Brussels. He next attended the circus workshop in Chalons, France for three months. There, Jens met Todd Strong, who was the juggling instructor. "Todd helped me a lot with structuring my three-ball routine to music," Jeton says. "I never worked on a stage act before; I was just juggling."

When considering a career as an entertainer, Jens realized that the name Thorwächter was rather unwieldy for stage billing. He dubbed himself Jeton, the name being created through a bit of word play, combining the first few letters of his real first and last name into a word that means "gambling chip" in both German and French. A good choice of names, as Jeton is not only fluent in both languages (having grown up in both countries) but enjoys games of chance. Plus, he employs such a coin-like chip in his act, in the monocle trick.

Returning to Germany, Jeton went with a girlfriend to see *Et Cetera*, a small touring variety show. Learning that the juggler in the show was leaving, Jens' girlfriend told the director, "Here is another juggler." Jens was invited to show them his act, and two days later he did an audition. He was hired and stayed on with *Et Cetera* for the next four years.

By the time of his debut with the *Et Cetera* show, Jeton had already been studying the gentleman style for a number of years, and had largely been dedicating his practice in that direction. Having read what little he could find on the subject in books, Jeton utilized the library of the University of Frankfurt, where they had back issues of *Organ* magazine, the European publication for circus and variety. Jeton remembers, "I took every issue and checked to see if there was something written about jugglers. On one page I found an advertisement of Arthur Caral — it was a cartoon, with a title underneath that read 'Salon And Strongman Juggler,' and an address in Munich. I thought, hey, this guy could still be living!" Caral was already retired at that point, but Jeton was able to track him down and arrange a meeting.

Arthur Caral's primary work had been with iron balls, but he was also a very good balancer. As Jeton states, "An important aspect of gentleman juggling is the combination of juggling



and balancing, and he was very good at it." Caral came from a performing family of several generations; his parents juggled under the names 4 Arioso and Zwei Lienarths. Arthur was also fortunate to practice in Munich with another outstanding juggler, Josef Blank.

Other jugglers had visited Caral before and he had never wanted to give anything away, but after meeting the 17-year-old Jeton he invited the young juggler to return in a few months, when he had made some more progress. On his second visit, Jeton was given a hat and cane, along with instruction on how to throw them up onto a cigar in the mouth, a move from Caral's old act. Caral told him, "Take this home with you and if you can master it, come back to me."

"I practiced and practiced," says Jeton, "and as soon as I had it I went down and I showed it to him. And from that moment on he told me everything. But I had first to prove I was worthy of getting more." Caral became his first teacher, the first professional juggler who helped him on his way.

With the gentleman style as his goal, Jeton was fortunate to find not one but two teachers of the art. The second was a Dutch juggler, Constant. Jeton saw one of his final performances and went backstage to introduce himself, saying he was also working toward the gentleman style. Constant invited Jeton to visit at his home in The Netherlands, which he did.

Jeton recalls, "Constant had a chance to

meet Felix Adanos before he died, and he sent me copies of letters Adanos wrote to him with some explanation about how he started learning several tricks and how he structured his routines. That was a big help for me, getting some of this information."

Gentleman jugglers seem to have a history of being true gentlemen offstage as well as on. When Kara fell on hard times during World War I, it was Salerno — who should have been his chief rival in the business — who gave him props and aid. As Adanos felt Constant was worthy of his help in learning the craft, so did Constant impart his knowledge to Jeton, all seeing each other as colleagues rather than opponents. "Constant was very important for me, and so helpful with everything," says Jeton, rather amazed that a professional would take such time with a young student.

Not coming from a performing family himself, but pleased that his parents allowed him the freedom to pursue such an unusual career, Jeton may have somehow filled a need for Arthur Caral to pass on his livelihood as well, as he never had a son of his own.

Before gaining the guidance of these professionals, Jeton had tried to learn all on his own, and crafted his own props, "but in the beginning I didn't know how to do things, and my props were much too heavy." The trick of balancing a picture frame on his forehead, then sliding the frame from end-to-end, corner-to-corner to a new balance, was especially difficult.

"I hit myself," he says. "My forehead was bloody all the time, and my mother told me to stop it. Also, the top hats were bloody inside, because when I caught the hats on my head they would open the wound from the frame. There was always a little blood inside the hats..."

"Constant finally told me how I could practice it better and how to make it sure. There are many stories about how Adanos had something extra on his forehead, that there was a slide, and things like that — it's all bull. I tried many things and they didn't work for me. I finally learned it, the regular wood on my wood," he laughs, pointing to his head. Jeton now regularly performs the frame trick with a large mirror weighing ten kilos (22 pounds); "My callus is quite hard on my forehead."

He actually has two calluses there — one from the mirror frame, and another from catching a billiard cue in a balance on his face. The spots are in different positions, as each of the props always lands in its own point. Unlike other jugglers, Jeton has no callus from his work with top hats. "The others are too strong; there was no space anymore for a top hat callus," he laughs.

The billiard cue feat is unique: Jeton places one cue atop another, balancing them on his chin



[Left] Sliding the mirror over his forehead, corner to corner. [Bottom] Balancing the "Salerno ring," Jeton showers four balls through the hoop while one revolves inside... and an airplane happens to fly past.

in a T shape; on top of that is a ball. But that's only the balance — the main trick is that the ball falls down to land in one hand, the cue from the chin is caught in the other hand, and the top cue drops down to land in the forehead balance.

Over the years of development and performance, Jeton's growth into a true gentleman juggler has been very smartly thought out. He not only thinks of what tricks to do, but *why* he is doing them, and what is or is not appropriate for his stage character.

IJA members may recall seeing Jeton performing at the 1995 festival in Las Vegas. While most of his act was in character, he included a routine with three clubs, a necessity to make his act longer in those days. "You can't build up a gentleman juggling act right away," he says. "I had to fit in something else to fill the time, because I was already working with my act."

On New Year's Eve 1996, he finished his final contract with *Et Cetera* and told himself, "this is the last show with clubs." His new routines were not yet ready for the next contract, which was just two weeks later, "but I was so fed up with clubs that I put them aside and I never touched them again for a show."

For a very short time he did some work with bottles in place of the clubs, but even that did not fit the style he wanted. "I finally went more into the direction of the image that I had in mind from Kara, Salerno, and Adanos. It was a good decision because there are too many jugglers who have the same style and props, and not so many doing the other stuff. This may be one reason why I have never been out of work."

Other routines have also been sacrificed over the years to strengthen the act as a whole. Jeton intends for everything he uses on stage to strengthen his character.

"Character is the main thing in gentleman juggling," he feels. "It's maybe more important than the trick. This is also why I'm not juggling a lot of balls anymore. When I do my three-ball routine, I can look into the audience at every moment. This gives me a very strong relationship with them. Because when I do the balances, for example, the billiard cue or the mirror, I look up — I impress them with a trick, but I don't have much connection with them at the moment. I keep them because they are fascinated with the balance and there is some tension, and they look at it and are concentrating. But right after that, everything must be moving in rela-

tionship with the public. And that's why the rest of the act is based on three objects."

Jeton's act opens with the hat and cane, variously adding the handkerchief, coin, and cigar. This is followed by a routine with three top hats, which he admits jugglers might consider to be "very basic, more simply structured" than hat work by others. But that was his intention. He does two balance-catches (throw from the cascade to a balance on his nose, and kick from the foot to a nose balance), and the rest is standard patterns, without the bouncing moves such as Kris Kremo does.

"I practiced the bouncing a long time, but I was never able to do it like Kris," says Jeton, "and I also thought it would be too close to him. Many people think he is a gentleman juggler, or they're using that term for him, so I feel I have to do other stuff. I do the hat routine very short, and more because the top hat is part of my costume; it fits into the scenery of my show."

After flipping hats on and off his head, Jeton checks his appearance in a mirror and ends up balancing and sliding it on his head. Next comes the three-ball routine, done with white silicone balls which could easily be understood to be billiard balls. The billiard cue balance and catch finishes the act, which is exactly ten minutes long.

"I don't stretch the gentleman juggling act," he says, "because I don't like to make it weak. I work exactly to the music. I did stretch it a few times, but I was never happy doing it. I would rather offer the people a second act."

In this second act, Jeton also performs in a stylistic, classical manner, again using props familiar to gentleman jugglers, along with some strongman routines. He does a neck catch with an iron ball, and a balance with an iron ball and some wooden sticks. The heavy metal ball also gets juggled along with a paper ball and a bottle, the ball being caught balanced on the bottle at the finish.

The act features "the Salerno ring," a stunt that used to close Jeton's main act until he replaced it with the billiard cues. The trick involves a ring on top of a pole balanced on the forehead. A ball continually revolves around the inside of the ring, kept in motion by the up-and-down movement of Jeton's knees. At the same time he showers four balls under the ring, and then tosses each of the balls through the center of the balanced prop. In practice, he was able to briefly do the trick with five balls, "but I was never able to shower them through the ring. I don't know if Salerno really did it, because there are some pictures where he had a lot of balls in it. I think it's not possible... but maybe it is."

Jeton has other tricks and routines which he can bring out if necessary — such as an Adanos-style bit with a feather pen, an inkwell,



[Above] The gentleman strongman, catching an iron ball on his neck. [Left] Jeton on stage with a big band — just like the old days, and yet before his time.

a plate, and an envelope — but does not use them on a regular basis. Even his second act has only been done on cruise ships and corporate jobs. "I did it just one time in variété," he says, "but most of the time in Germany you have one act, and it has to be strong and short. You have to go out, do the best you can, and finish before you get boring!" Yet he still rehearses new and different routines, as his act is constantly evolving. Jeton always has fresh ideas in the works, and credits his great friend and inspiration Rudy Horn for a number of them.

From a casino in Italy to over four months in Copenhagen, to Alaska cruises and theaters in Japan and Korea, Jeton's classical, silent juggling can work almost anywhere. While he does an occasional corporate show, most of his work is in European variété and cabaret theaters, primarily in long-term (one-month or longer) contracts. He says that is the work he enjoys most, since after all these years he still loves juggling and practicing. Staying in one spot and doing one or two shows every day "is much easier for a juggler."

As he leaves the stage, and the music of the Goodman, Ellington, or Basie orchestras fades into the audience's memory, Jeton muses, "I think there are not many people who really know what gentleman juggling is. I think today they use the term gentleman juggling for somebody who has a classical dress, like a tuxedo or bow tie, and juggles three objects. But the term actually was something different. In the style of using those everyday objects from a living room or salon, so far as I know, there is nobody else doing this now."

"In a way it's antique," he laughs. "People love antique furniture, they love antique cars... why shouldn't they love antique jugglers?" ●

Upcoming performances for Jeton include Palazzo Spiegelteent Dinnerspektacular, (Mannheim, Germany; November 11, 2004 – January 16, 2005), and Circus Krone (Munich, Germany; March 1 – April 3).

JUGGLE

feedback

Jeton

I well remember watching the performances of the IJA *European Showcase* in 1995 and being struck by one particular performer. It was his eyes, more than anything, that really captured my attention and made his act so memorable. Later, whenever I would watch the *Highlights* video at home, it saddened me to realize that I couldn't recall his name.

Today I open my copy of *JUGGLE* [Nov/Dec 2004] to the article about Jeton and... *oh, them eyes!* Still striking even after nine years, and a classy act to boot. Never again will I forget his name.

Thanks for bringing Jeton's act — and his name — the attention he deserves.

DINA SCHARNHORST
CINCINNATI, OHIO



Jeton photo by Bahmann-J. Börger.