

When modern day gentleman juggler Jeton received the Spring 2009 issue of *JUGGLE*, he was especially interested in the article on pioneer gentleman juggler Salerno. But upon reading the story, he noticed a lack of information about a unique prop in which Jeton has an understandable interest, so he set about chronicling the history of...

THE SALERNO RING

By Alan Howard



IMAGE: COURTESY HERMANN SAGEMÜLLER

Adolf Salerno was one of the world's great jugglers, as well as an inventor and a pioneer aviator. His style of "gentleman juggling" was quite popular in the early 20th century, featuring surprising feats performed with items that a gentleman of the time might carry with him or adapt from the appointments of a drawing room. While this style of work has largely passed into history, at least one of his tricks not only carried on Salerno's name, but it is still being performed today, some 100 years after its creation.

The Salerno Ring balance involves a pole that is placed on the juggler's forehead; atop the pole is a ring in which a billiard ball is coaxed to revolve, thanks to impetus generated by the continuous up-and-down motion from the juggler's knees. It is difficult enough to imagine maintaining the balance as he bounced slightly with each revolution of the ball above, but at the same time, Salerno would shower four more balls, throwing them under, above, and finally through the ring. It was a one-of-a-kind stunt, and the prop came to be named after its creator.

Salerno's main competitor was a man known as Kara — Michael Steiner from Nuremberg, Germany. Like Salerno, Kara performed a highly skilled gentleman juggler act, and worked on stages all over the world. When the First World War broke out on August 14, 1914, Kara was in Paris; as a German citizen, France was suddenly the wrong place for him to be, and he was arrested merely because of his nationality. Enduring four years in prison, after the war had come to an end he was exchanged for the release of a French prisoner of war. Kara wanted to get back into show business as fast as possible. Unfortunately he had no props, no money, and he had gone four years without training. But a wonderful humanitarian act occurred. His supposed rival, Adolf Salerno, offered his own props so that Kara could start practic-

ing again. In December 1918, Kara had his comeback onstage at the Drei Linden variété theater in Leipzig. It was at this time that he first included the Salerno Ring balance in his repertoire.

The trick passed from one artist to another, but that was only the first such transition of ownership for this unusual prop.

In 1922, the German artists Zwei Lienarth's, a husband-and-wife juggling duo, gave birth to their son, Artur. He showed an affinity for juggling and balancing at a young age and learned very quickly, eventually starting his own career under the name of "Bob Artur." Artur loved the elegant style of the gentleman jugglers and decided to focus his practice in that direction. One day, his mother decided to contact Artur's idol Kara, who was already retired. She asked Kara if he might consent to Artur doing the Salerno Ring balance, as her son very much wished to learn it. After seeing Artur's skills, Kara offered to give the young performer all of his old props, but Artur just took the Salerno Ring — a decision that he later regretted, because Kara had so many wonderful routines which could have been passed along to future generations.

Artur started to rehearse with the Salerno Ring, and changed his stage name from Bob Artur to "Caral," in honor of his idol, Kara. He developed a very unusual act of both gentleman juggling and strongman juggling. Artur and his wife Gerti performed as The Carals in 52 countries around the world, appearing in such prestigious venues as Berlin's Friedrichstadtpalast, Circus Krone in Munich, the Mikado in Tokyo, and in the US on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Caral retired and settled in Munich where, in the late 1980s, a young juggler, Jens Thorwächter from Frankfurt, contacted him and asked his help in creating a gentleman juggling act. Caral invited the young man to come do a rehearsal in Munich, to see if the teenage jug-

gler deserved his help. Caral especially wanted to learn if the youngster had enough talent and passion for this hard work. Jens, who soon changed his professional name to Jeton, remembers, “His teaching began in a process over a couple of months, and I had several things to learn and to master before I got his props. I always went to Munich to see him; we practiced a day or two together and then he told me what I had to learn next. When I was able to accomplish the skills he set for me, we met again and my training continued.”

It was very important to Artur to see if Jeton might be the proper person to receive the older juggler’s specialized props. Other jugglers had asked him for them in the past, but Artur always refused. After witnessing Jeton’s initial training, Artur wanted to sell the props to his student, but some months later the young juggler finally received them as a gift. Jeton recalls, “He was always very proud of me and he loved to speak with me about juggling and the artist life and business. Artur was not only a mentor, he was a friend and treated me like his own son — I am very, very grateful to him!”

The process of learning the Salerno Ring balance-and-juggling combination was a long and difficult one. Jeton first performed the feat for an audience — with the original apparatus that has passed from generation to generation — in 1992. The next year, he obtained a contract with a touring variété show in Germany, giving him the chance to hone the routine in actual performance six days a week. “As you know,” Jeton says, “it is a big difference to do something every day perfect in front of an audience, or just from time to time in your gym.”

The trick has become one of Jeton’s trademarks, and he is proud to keep the work alive in a new era. He performs the balance with four juggled balls going under, and then finally through the ring, just as Kara and Caral did it. As far as he knows, the earlier jugglers only performed the stunt with four balls, even though one illustration of Salerno shows more balls, added for effect in print. “Caral had an extension [on the pole], so it was possible to juggle five balls at the same time under the ring,” Jeton says. “But somehow the rhythm of the cascade and the rotating ball in the ring never matched well together. I tried with Caral to do five, and probably Kara tried the Ring with five balls as well, but we never had the perfect rhythm and a good feeling doing it. And anyway, it was extremely difficult with four!”

This trick has never been sold or copied without permission among the four jugglers

who have performed it — it has been passed on as a gesture of humanity, friendship, and esteem for the next generation of gentleman juggler. As for the future of the trick, Jeton says, “If one day somebody comes up and he is very interested in the art form of gentleman juggling, if he is talented in balancing and juggling and if he has a good character, I’ll be more than happy to help him and to make sure that there will be another generation of gentleman jugglers.” ●

Thanks to Jeton and Hermann Sagemüller for the information and photos in this article.



PHOTO: COURTESY HERMANN SAGEMÜLLER



PHOTO: COURTESY JETON



PHOTO: COURTESY JETON



PHOTO: KLARA WINTER

This promotional drawing [opposite page] may be the only picture of Salerno juggling with the ball rotating inside his balanced Ring.

Kara performing the Salerno Ring in 1920 [top left].

Artur Caral with the Salerno Ring, onstage in Barcelona [bottom left].

The Carals in later years, still presenting Salerno’s creation [top right].

Jeton performing at the Hansa Theater in Hamburg, Germany, 1997 [bottom right].