

Spotlight

In a Juggler Vein

By Pamela Sommers
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On Nick Newlin's first day as a Harvard freshman, he found his true calling.

"I came into my dorm room, and one of my roommates was juggling, doing a few three-ball routines," explains Newlin, a.k.a. Nicolo the Gypsy Juggler. "I had never seen juggling up close before, and was really floored by it. It excited me incredibly right off the bat. So I started practicing."

Though enrolled as a psychology major, Newlin spent the next two years perfecting his new-found craft and playing electric piano in a rock band. Then he made his first significant career move.

"I had a vision in my mind that I could make a living as a street performer in Paris," says Newlin. So he took a year off, found a nice little apartment near the Centre Pompidou—a prime location for outdoor entertainers using that museum's huge courtyard as their stage—and began his self-styled internship.

"I wrote a poem in French about rabbits and hunters and had the juggling balls go along with the story, so that as I increased the number of balls, the rabbits were multiplying. I also juggled burning torches that I carved out of broom handles . . . I was miserable at first, but I watched the other performers, and learned how to gather a crowd and get people to pay afterward."

For a time, Newlin teamed up with a French entertainer, and then rounded out his year abroad with a working tour of southern Europe. On his return to the States, he plied his trade on the streets of Boston, San Francisco, Key West, Fla., and other venues, taught juggling and,



BY M. HAUPTSCHHEIN

Nicolo the Gypsy Juggler and the Queen of Whimsy in action.

in 1982, even managed to complete his undergraduate degree.

It was during that period that Newlin became aware of and eventually associated with the New Vaudevillians, a young crop of clowns, magicians and stunt people—among them the Flying Karamazov Brothers, Avner the Eccentric, Bill Irwin, Penn and Teller, and the members of the Chesapeake Vaudeville Revue—intent on both celebrating and reenergizing a classic theatrical form. The latter group, a loosely organized ensemble of artists founded by New York tap dancer "Toes" Tiranoff, provided Newlin with a particularly congenial forum for his act.

"We all met in Baltimore, while performing side by side at Lexington Market as part of this 'sprucing up the atmosphere' job. Toes originated the group and the name, and different performers have come and gone." (The current roster includes Tiranoff; 71-year-old hooper Lewis (The Hawk) Hawkins; Joanne Flynn, a tightrope walker and mime who calls herself "The Queen of Whimsy"; drummer/guitarist/pianist Alan Paul Dean Jr.; and Newlin.) "We decided we didn't want to crowd each other out, so we live in different cities," Newlin jokes. "We all rehearse our bits individually, and then bring them together in as cohesive a way as possible. In the best tradition of vaudeville, we present one unusual act after another."

Take, for example, Newlin's "fruit flamboyant": "It's an invention of mine, the only one of its-kind I think. I knew that a lot of jugglers juggled flaming things and sharp things, so I thought, 'Why not do something that is both flaming and sharp?' So it's essentially a torch with a blade attached to it, and then I juggle another sharp object while eating an apple, and then I throw the apple up and attach it to the blade while the flames are licking around me."

Aside from his work with the Chesapeake Vaudeville Revue, Newlin makes his living by appearing in theatrical productions such as the Folger's zany "Merry Wives of Windsor" and on the Renaissance fair circuit. With the Queen of Whimsy and her animal associates—two mules, a donkey and two performing roosters—he travels for nine months out of the year, residing in a little pop-up trailer on various festival sites.

Newlin says the transient life style suits him just fine; when things get to him, he just starts juggling.

"It's kind of like meditation," he explains. "You're so concerned with keeping the balls going that you can't think about your car payment."

The Chesapeake Vaudeville Revue performs tonight and tomorrow night at 7:30 at d.c. space. For information, call 347-4960.