

Master the fine art of juggling

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When it comes to hosting master classes, the Actors Gymnasium doesn't fool around.

The Evanston circus and performing arts school previously convinced Marcel Marceau to drop by to teach a little imaginary rope pulling and Avner the Eccentric to expound on the art of clowning around. The school has pulled a similar coup by enticing Michael Moschen, generally hailed as one of the greatest jugglers in the world, to toss a few balls with the local talent.

Moschen, 47, will teach a master class and workshop Wednesday evening and perform Tuesday and next Thursday evenings.

"This is a rare opportunity to see him perform in such an intimate setting," said Actors Gymnasium co-founder Tony Adler, comparing the event to having Bruce Springsteen play an acoustic guitar in your living room. "The last time he was in town he filled the 1,400-seat Chicago Theatre with a spectacular show full of giant sets and light and sound effects. This will be more of a chamber theater evening."

Bigger isn't better

In fact, Moschen, interrupted while making breakfast for his daughter Isabella in his Connecticut home, said he has begun to perform for smaller audiences whenever he can these days. He recalled a recent trip to Dublin where he performed outside of a theater in a town square using props he carried in two suitcases.

"The large shows get to be cumbersome at times," he said. "This will be a much more relaxed, more personal situation. We're just going to have fun."

An up-close-and-personal setting seems the ideal place to observe this artist. Moschen has invested long years of introspection and study into developing forms of object manipulation radically different from the traditional juggling techniques handed down from the Middle Ages.

He dropped out of high school and embarked on a course of rigorous personal training involving dance, martial arts and acrobatics as well as the study of philosophy, architecture, mathematics and physics. He frequently lectures on creativity at institutions such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Carnegie Mellon and Lincoln Center. In 1990 he was awarded a five-year "genius grant" from the McCarthur Foundation.

"In Mr Moschen's hands, juggling becomes a balletic art," according to The New York Times. The San Francisco Examiner describes him as "a kind of dancer-physicist: someone who can bend and twist the visible world."

Yet audiences around the world have found his performances accessible, entertaining and mesmerizing for nearly 30 years.

Control issues

"What juggling is really about is dealing with the many levels and controlling a chaotic world," said Moschen, whose earliest influence was sitting on his father's knee in the local pool hall in tiny Greenfield, Mass., and observing a virtuoso performance from world champion billiards master Willie Mosconi. "The juggler is the master controller. If you reduce that to its most annoying level, it boils down to 'I can do this and you can't.' If you elevate it, the juggler disappears - and then you have something worth seeing."

Moschen, who credits his drive for excellence to his father's enthusiasm for masterful athletic skill, originally intended to become a professional golfer. He claims to have been extremely good at the sport - and there's no reason not to believe him. Yet his direction in life changed entirely at age 12, when he made the acquaintance of another Greenfield kid, Penn Gilette.

Moschen and Gilette, who later went on to fame as half of the rogue magic team Penn and Teller, checked a book on juggling out of the library.

"That led to knife-throwing, fire-eating and unicycle-riding," mused Moschen, who turned professional with Gilette in the early days of their careers before realizing they were essentially on different paths: "I loved skill; He loved deception - the psychology of magic."

Since that time, Moschen has devoted himself to the exploration of his art.

"Anybody who is really good at what they do is either born good at it or sacrificed significant parts of their lives to get there," he said. "That's part of the bargain. That's why people pay money for tickets. Artists are scouts. That's our job: Go out, find beautiful things and bring them back."

Michael Moschen offers a master class and workshop from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. Wednesday in the Actors Gymnasium, 927 Noyes St., Evanston. The participation fee is \$125, \$75 for students and professionals. Observation is \$10. Moschen performs at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday and next Thursday, also in the Actors Gymnasium. Tickets are \$25. Call (847) 328-2795.

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