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The Ivy League Vagabond Who Started the Big Apple Circus

Ralph Gardner Jr. Tries His Hand at Juggling With Paul Binder

By

RALPH GARDNER JR.

If you could acquire any skill that would be guaranteed to impress children and adults alike, that would make you a hit at parties, that would wow the ladies—and the men for that matter—what would it be?

Making lots of money would be a good place to start. But that's not what I'm talking about. I mean a physical skill, a talent that suggests coordination and makes people more intrigued about you; that in some small, subliminal way suggests there's sparkle to your personality—a deep, subterranean reservoir of drive and passion that can just be glimpsed behind your smooth, debonair, unemotive exterior.

Enlarge Image



Close



Big Apple Circus

Paul Binder is the founder of the Big Apple Circus. Above, a file photo from when he served as ringmaster.

I'm talking about juggling, of course. Who wouldn't want to know how to juggle? I'm not suggesting doing it for a living. But simply when the action lags at a business meeting or a cocktail party, and you spy off in the corner, say, several rubber balls, a bowling pin or two, and maybe

one of those rubber chickens you can buy at novelty shops—what any of these objects would be doing in a Midtown office or someone's home, for that matter, I have no idea—being able to pick them up and prove yourself capable of keeping all of them aloft at the same time, and then catching them before they drop to the floor.

It was something like that desire to learn a bold new trick that found me on a recent afternoon at Dube Juggling, a store on lower Broadway that has answers to all your juggling needs. These include juggling balls, of course, as well as juggling clubs, knives, bean bags, cigar boxes, hats, scarves, rings, fire torches, unicycles and rola bola boards. Indeed, the only thing you have to supply yourself might be the stilted banter that professional jugglers seem to feel essential to their craft.

I happened to be there in the august company of Paul Binder, the founder and onetime ringmaster of the Big Apple Circus and the author of a new memoir, "Never Quote the Weather to a Sea Lion," about his life in the circus.

Mr. Binder claimed he'd have me juggling in no time. "I think I can give him a basic pattern in half an hour to 45 minutes," he boasted.

I told him I already knew how to juggle two balls. He was unimpressed. "Three is juggling," he sniffed. "Two isn't. One more object than hands becomes juggling."

One of Mr. Binder's many claims to fame is that he taught Glenn Close juggling when she was preparing for her role in the musical "Barnum." Indeed, so grateful was she for his help that she provided the book's forward. "We started with one ball and the simple flicking motion that you make with your wrist when you toss a ball up," she wrote. "Then,

after several days of that, the simplest of motions, he gave me a second ball....Of course, it took weeks [*italics Ms. Close's*] for me to start feeling comfortable."

Weeks? As I said, I only had 45 minutes, max. Besides, we were standing in the middle of a juggling supply store, not on some empty stage or in some studio lot, or wherever Mr. Binder taught the actress. And who do you think visits juggling supply stores? It's not the kind of place where Brazilian or Chinese tourists simply drop by on their way to a Hollister or AppleAAPL -0.58% store, saying: "Why don't we pick up trick ropes and a few hula hoops?"

The average customer is a circus or street professional, I assume, or some sort of hipster performance artist successfully delaying the onset of adulthood. In other words, I was even more self-conscious than normal for fear of a judgmental audience.

Indeed, delaying adulthood indefinitely might describe Mr. Binder's career. After he graduated from Dartmouth in the 1960s, he and Michael Christensen, with whom he'd go on to found the Big Apple Circus, traveled across Europe juggling. "We went all the way from London to Istanbul juggling in the streets," he remembered. "We were making our living that way. We had no other money."

I wondered what his parents thought of his calling, even though my recollection is that in the late '60s and early '70s, becoming a vagabond was a lot more common than it is these days. "They wondered why a guy with two Ivy League degrees was going to become a street juggler," he remembered. "They thought I was out of my mind, and I was." (The other degree was an MBA from Columbia University.)

From the sound of it, his parents weren't blameless. His father, a salesman, was also a jazz musician. "The happiest days of my childhood he'd walk around playing the violin," Mr. Binder recalled.

And his mother sounds like a repressed stage mom. Mr. Binder recalled the first time he attended the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade—and it wasn't on a float, as he would do with the Big Apple Circus dozens of times in the future. He said he was 4 years old, and with the crowd five-deep his father asked a gentleman with a better vantage whether Paul might sit on his shoulders. "Six months later we went to 'Miracle on 34th Street,'" he said, referring to the 1947 movie starring Maureen O'Hara, John Payne, a 9-year-old Natalie Wood and Edmund Gwenn as Kris Kringle. "Four or five minutes into the movie, my mother jumped out of her seat and shouted, 'That's Paul. That's my son Paul.'"

Sure enough, there he was on screen—the kid in the cap with earflaps sitting on somebody's shoulders, directly behind the white-bearded, kindly Kris Kringle. I asked whether his mother was proud of what he eventually accomplished: starting an intimate circus that has become a New York cultural institution.

"Eventually," Mr. Binder said. "It took her a long time to understand I created something in many ways dedicated to her. She was one of those people who needed to be lifted out of her everyday burdens. She loved to see a show."

We could procrastinate no longer. The time had come to teach me how to juggle. Mr. Binder told me to place two balls—or rather, juggling beanbags—in my right hand and one in the left. The secret, at least part

of it, comes in keeping your body still, your shoulders squared, as you toss the ball at least to eye level, and building a rhythm.

To be honest, I can't remember what he taught me. After five or 10 minutes I managed to get three bags into the air simultaneously and, most important of all, to catch them on the way down. But only once or twice.

But that's not the hardest part about juggling. The hardest part is having to chase the damn ball or beanbag after you drop it and it skips across the room and under the radiator, or in this case under displays filled with staffs, circus whips and juggling books. And all the time having the store's owner, Brian Dube, videotaping us.

So can I juggle now? Of course not. Among the things Mr. Binder neglected to teach me before time ran out was how to repeat the cycle once you've successfully managed to toss the balls in the air and catch them once.

The Big Apple Circus founder presented me the bags as a gift. My main regret, besides not learning how to juggle, was neglecting to have him autograph the bean bags, because instead of making appearances at dinner parties, they'll probably sit on my shelf in perpetuity.

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Corrections & Amplifications

In an earlier version of this article, Brian Dube of Dube Juggling was incorrectly referred to as Paul Dube.

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