



## People-Juggling *Juggle Magazine*

By Chip Lowell – 01.2001

**“Warning: Audience members who want to throw themselves into the action at this year’s It’s Magic! spectacular at the Alex Theater can do just that. Literally. Volunteer for the juggling act and you get juggled!”**

The above quote was only the beginning of a glowing review which recently appeared in the Los Angeles Times. Even though the show was top-heavy with magic acts and illusions galore, the Times critic spent almost half her article extolling the “classy, edgy, jaw-dropping and hilarious” juggling act of The Passing Zone, who, night after night, stole the show hands down.

The Passing Zone, made up of veteran jugglers Jon Wee and Owen Morse, have continued along in their rising career, topping themselves at every crossroad with yet another challenging trick or routine. After the ever-escalating parade of dangerous objects, ranging from sickles to fire torches and even running chainsaws, they finally hit upon an idea that was... well, obvious.

Why not juggle the audience?

While at first glance it might seem a little absurd and even ridiculous, the initial concept soon took on a life of its own and over time evolved into a solid and rewarding finale to their show-stopping performances.

Using three unsuspecting audience volunteers, The Passing Zone outfits their human props with astronaut uniforms and harnesses, suspending them several feet in the air. With a series of carefully planned, choreographed moves, the three “Jugglenauts” dart and swing through space, passing each other and even a few planets which are also being juggled in and around them. Visually, the effect is both hysterical and even awe-inspiring! Amid patriotic fanfare The Passing Zone, along with their brave volunteers, take their final bows amid a flurry of confetti, as a gigantic American flag unfurls itself behind them.

Audience reaction often turns into standing ovations for this inventive juggling team. The feeling left with the enthusiastic crowd is that of a triumphant ticker-tape parade down Broadway. But the initial road to create “the ultimate juggling routine” was certainly filled with many unforeseen bumps and surprises at every turn.

There is no real road map when dealing with creativity. Trial and error become the mantra time and time again. Stubbornness and ignorant perseverance usually come in handy when you find yourself hitting those snags that stop the thinking process dead in its tracks.

As Jon and Owen had found out, their “funny idea” would take over four years of time and effort, not to mention thousands of dollars to carefully mold it into a solid, crowd-pleasing routine.

The duo first created The Passing Zone back in 1988, about two years after Jon and Owen had met at an IJA convention. Their chemistry seemed to click instantly, their banter was funny, and their combined personalities were likeable and well received by audiences. Although the initial act was



literally thrown together in only three days, anyone watching these two easily assumed that they had been working as a team forever.

Their personas both on stage and off are quite disarming and very friendly, with a nice dose of self-deprecating humor tossed in for good measure. Their brand of comedy seems to uplift an audience, rather than insult and denigrate them, as many of today's comedians seem to do.

And there's an important key to this style of performing. They, like a few others involved in show business, understand that juggling really shouldn't be taken too seriously. There's no brain surgery going on here and no one has found the cure for cancer. Juggling and the Art of Juggling should be pure fun and enjoyment.

In the midst of having a good time, The Passing Zone has been racking up awards and records along their merry way. They currently hold five Guinness World Records and 18 IJA Championship Gold Medals, which is more than any other team in IJA history. Now that's real fun, eh?

For the past 12 years, The Passing Zone's resume has grown considerably. They've traveled around the globe with notable stops here and there for Royal Command Performances, World Expos, NBA halftime shows, a Miss America Pageant, and a number of casino appearances, including Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas and the Taj Mahal in Atlantic City. As an opening act, they've had the pleasure to work with such stars as Bob Hope, Sheena Easton, and Tony Bennett.

Owen and Jon also pop up on the tube from time to time on such shows as The Today Show, The Tonight Show, MADtv, Comic Strip Live, An Evening at the Improv, and Live with Regis & Kathie Lee. In the Addams Family movie, they doubled for Raul Julia and Christopher Lloyd, passing daggers back and forth during the grand ballroom scene.

Currently, the majority of their work takes place in the corporate arena, performing for many Fortune 500 companies throughout the world.

A good performer quickly learns the importance of having at least one successful signature piece under their belt. These are original, stand-alone routines, which give a nice kick to their shows and help audiences remember them long after the curtain has come down.

Anyone who hears the tune My Way quickly associates it with Frank Sinatra's voice. The same goes for David Copperfield vanishing the Statue of Liberty or Michael Moschen rolling glass spheres along his arms and hands. A clever signature piece will sometimes create a special buzz about the performer. This, in turn, often dominoes into growing public interest, higher ticket sales, and even more prestigious bookings and appearances.

The Passing Zone, never happy to settle with the usual six-club "pass-around-the-scared-guy" bit as their finale, came up with their own signature pieces, featuring such routines as a full-blown ballet while juggling roaring chainsaws. People who have witnessed it swear that they will never look at Swan Lake the same way again.

The rewards of a successful new routine are great, but after the dust begins to settle on the last bit, the mind begins to wander all over again, wondering what could possibly out-do the previous audience-pleasing stunt. The pressure to come up with something newer, better, and bigger can be enormous. When Jon and Owen hit upon the idea of "People-Juggling," it seemed like a natural progression for The Passing Zone.

The first initial concepts for the routine were quickly thrown out the window as they tried to think of a contraption that would allow them to manipulate three grown adults up, down, and sideways in mid-air. Safety, being the biggest concern, kept cropping up, and they soon realized they had a much larger obstacle ahead of them.

I had the opportunity to sit down and chat with Jon and Owen between shows at the Alex Theater in Glendale, California. They graciously walked me through, step by step, the long and challenging process of creating their newest routine. Their efforts demonstrate that there are no wrong solutions to solving problems, just a seemingly endless path of stepping-stones on the road to achieving the desired, final effect.

JUGGLE: Your "People-Juggling" finale is quite impressive and the audience seems to love it. How did you figure out all the logistics during the initial stages of developing the routine?

JON: Well, as luck would have it, we happened to catch Jorg Muller performing a musical juggling piece using large chimes hanging from a single point. He would then swing the pipes back and forth, hitting them and causing them to sway in various patterns. It was a beautiful routine, very visual.

OWEN: Immediately, we thought, why not hang our volunteers? String 'em up! Let 'em swing!

JUGGLE: Thankfully, you didn't say that out loud and get promptly arrested.

JON: Oh, I'm sure there's still time...(laughs). After watching Jorg the light bulb went on in our heads. We contacted him and explained what we wanted to do. We didn't want to ruffle any feathers so we asked his permission to adapt his swinging concept to our growing ambition for juggling live people. He agreed and even helped us with any questions we had.

OWEN: Then we decided to start out small. We attached plastic milk bottles to some strings and tied them to a horizontal tree branch. The first thing we noticed was that "braiding" would occur, with the strings automatically tangling themselves around each other.

JON: So, we realized that certain patterns had to be reversed every so often to un-braid the ropes before going into a different pattern or direction. Quite methodically, we soon knew that if we did this particular pattern five times in a row, we would have to reverse the whole procedure to untangle the wires for the next move. This took us weeks to figure out, with special "holds" being established here and there at various points to help with the unwinding process.

JUGGLE: From milk bottles you move on to...?

JON: Another tree branch with more space and a harness. We took turns hooking one of us in, then swinging him around a bit.

OWEN: The interesting thing is it didn't start out with juggling three astronauts. We were thinking, who would be the hardest person to juggle? How about sumo wrestlers? So we bought a sumo outfit, with the intention being that the foam suit would safely pad the volunteer.

JON: That initially came because we thought if we're going to juggle people, they really should be padded, and if we're going to practice with people, they ought to be padded as well. The big comical-looking sumo suits were perfect. We thought that would be hilarious! That's what the routine

should be. Three people in really big sumo wrestling suits. Isn't a sumo wrestler the ultimate person for someone to juggle?

OWEN: But then we quickly realized that we'd come up with a one-joke thing. There was no real routine or through-line to keep it interesting for several minutes.

JUGGLE: And you had spent how much at this point?

OWEN: Seven hundred bucks on a used sumo suit, then \$1,000 for somebody to modify the suit and properly rig it with the harness. And that was just the beginning. By the time this routine was fully realized, we had spent over \$30,000.

JUGGLE: You're bringing up some important information here. Up and coming performers usually assume that "new" routines can basically be bought right off the shelf, without taking the time or money to fully develop them.

JON: Absolutely. It's always a lesson learned. All kinds of money was spent, which simply got us to the next great idea along the creative process.

OWEN: And to develop a harness that would be comfortable enough for someone 5'3" to 6'3" high, 100 to 200 pounds... You know, we've had guys in these harnesses that weighed over 250 pounds, and yet they still felt really comfortable.

JUGGLE: That's amazing! Especially since those volunteers are different every single show.

JON: Yeah. You really can't hang an average Joe from the audience in a harness by their crotch. Those harnesses are pretty painful to wear for an extended amount of time. And if you're a professional, you just don't subject your audience volunteers to such torture.

JUGGLE: And I imagine that you can't ask them to adjust their crotch area for safety purposes as if they were going to parachute from an airplane.

JON: Right. And we can't adjust their crotch areas for them either! (Laughs) Owen and I getting into a harness is a completely different situation than asking strangers from the audience to do the same in the middle of a performance.

OWEN: And your own personal harness is usually a perfect fit; it's specifically designed for your own size and dimensions. We had to have something that would snugly fit someone, within seconds, no matter what his or her size and shape.

JUGGLE: Wow, it causes one to think of all the safety concerns that must have cropped up.

JON: Yep. Once we came up with this new routine, we had to raise our insurance coverage to a \$2-million policy. Because all it takes is someone walking offstage going, "Oh, gee, now I've got back problems and it must have been those jugglers!"

JUGGLE: You've basically created what amounts to a Disneyland trill ride of sorts.

OWEN: This was one idea that seemed to just get bigger and bigger during development. And by the way, even if something doesn't go wrong, you could still have someone trying to say that it did. Either way, real or fake, you have to be prepared.

JON: You get into this area where you do have to take the precautionary measures very seriously. This isn't like, "Whoa, I hope a torch doesn't fall off the front of the stage." This is a routine where you can never have a mistake take place, and if you do, it can ruin your life... and someone else's.

OWEN: So you over-build it, and you make sure the cables are strong enough to support over 7,000 pounds each, with 10,000-pound webbing to secure them and hold them in place. You just have to do it that way.

JUGGLE: I imagine you want to keep potential problems down to a minimum. For instance, what if someone suddenly jumps or yanks the wrong way during the routine or if someone begins swinging incorrectly?

JON: Every once in a while another new thing happens where we think, "Wow, okay, that's an interesting development. Now we know what to do about that, and thankfully nothing bad came of it." It's a learning process as the routine is being built and rehearsed. We really have to take that into consideration for future performances, and now we know what to do in case that should ever happen again. There's always the unexpected.

JUGGLE: You're referring to a couple nights ago when you sprained your ankle during a show?

JON: Exactly. There's a point during the show where we're swinging one person in a giant orbit, and I run and jump onto him and ride him around like I'm a cowboy, which gets a good laugh. And I just went to jump onto him and didn't time it correctly, didn't jump high enough and didn't get my grip right. I felt my hands slip right off, and I was moving fairly quickly. I came down from about five feet in the air, landed with my leg under me, and all my weight thrown right on top of my ankle.

JUGGLE: Ouch!

JON: I jumped back up and I knew right away that I had hurt myself. I kept thinking to myself, "This could be broken!" Realize we were only half-finished with the routine at this point! But we kept pushing along.

JUGGLE: How long is the "People-Juggling" routine?

JON: I think it's about nine minutes long. There's a while set-up to establish the basic concept, and then we get three people out there. We start with "test-piloting" one volunteer and then we juggle all three. By the end, all three are swinging back and forth for a big patriotic finale, which is a joke send-up, and it really becomes a win-win situation either way.

OWEN: Yeah, because those in the audience that get it enjoy the spoof, and those that don't get it start tearing up because they think they're watching a real tribute to America and the Space Program. We love it!

JUGGLE: So, after your first idea to use sumo wrestler costumes, you then decided to go in what direction?

JON: Well, for a brief moment it was the Three Tenors...

JUGGLE: Opera singers?

JON: That came about because we were looking for the proper music; something classical to fit the bill sounded good. Then the visual of three fat guys in tuxedos flying around to opera music

sounded pretty funny. Two fat guys and the third would be really, really fat. But after the first couple of seconds, that too, like the sumo wrestlers, would become yet another “one-joke” concept.

JUGGLE: Good for a laugh but not for a whole routine.

OWEN: Exactly. Where can you go from there?

JUGGLE: It's like a bad pilot for television. The first half-hour show may have a funny idea, but it's not strong enough to carry the plot through twelve more episodes.

OWEN: Absolutely. Right, right. If it doesn't go anywhere...

JON: ...then it's over and you try another angle.

JUGGLE: So you actually went through each creative step quite a few times.

JON: Oh, yeah. For a week or two you really dive into that particular concept, then you get stuck and realize you've hit a dead-end of sorts. We've had talks with friends and just after the “Three Tenors” idea started to go south, Penn Jillette, of Penn & Teller, suggested the idea of using astronauts. I believe he even coined the term “juggle-nauts.”

OWEN: It made sense immediately. Comically speaking, that opened up so many more possibilities. And it's timeless. There will always be some kind of news or history involving the space program.

JON: And there's always an endless supply of jokes involving the space program – centimeters vs. inches, Tang drinks, O-rings, training maneuvers, Hubble telescope, using a helmet, etc. There's always something going on.

JUGGLE: A good and sound concept will inevitably write its own one-liners and bits.

JON: Exactly. Now we suddenly had tons of jokes to choose from. You know, “Houston, we have a problem,” etc.

OWEN: And then we thought about not only juggling the astronauts, but maybe throwing in some really large balls as well.

JON: Adding the ball thing made it look even more complicated and amazing to the audience. And then we realized, “Hey, the balls could be the planets!”

OWEN: So these massive balls were painted to look like the Earth, the Moon, and Mars, and we juggled them around the people as they flew about in the air.

JON: At that point, it finally all kind of fell together. Conceived originally with only using the three people, the planets being tossed around and through the pattern helped solidify the routine. Adding the planets was the last thing we thought about, and ironically it helped to become the “kicker” of the routine. Without it, there'd be no real finale, just three people swinging around in the air. It would have been horrible without the planets.

OWEN: Absolutely. And to think that before we added the planets we had already spent thousand and thousands of dollars creating the rigging, harnesses, suits, etc!

JUGGLE: It's never an exact science, is it?

OWEN: Not at all. Another thing we worried about was what if the volunteers got sick? Well, that would definitely kill the routine!

JON: Randy Pryor, Nicholas Night, Dana Daniels, Sandra Boyd, and a few other friends all came out, volunteering to be the guinea pigs. We had the rigging set up in a large warehouse where we practiced the routine for five-minute spans at a time. In the beginning everyone was getting totally nauseated. Once they were back on the ground, they didn't want to go up again. They really hated it. We did realize eventually that given the short amount of time required for the routine, it's not enough to make anyone queasy or ill. But in the process of rehearsals, we had friends in harnesses doing it five or six times in a row.

JUGGLE: Like a marathon roller-coaster ride...

OWEN: Yeah, "Check please!" Our friends would, of course, decline to volunteer for the next rehearsal session. But we did have crackers!

JON: Yep, we offered Saltines and Sprite! What a deal!

JUGGLE: With a solid foundation for the routine, and the logistic and safety concerns dealt with, how did the jokes and patter come about?

JON: This was actually one of the first times that we got together with a writer. Comedian Evan Davis, who's a really funny guy and writes for Garry Shandling, was brought on board to help us flesh out the routine and find all the humor in it we could tap. The comedy aspect was the easiest part of the whole process.

JUGGLE: Do you rig everything up yourselves? I imagine the pre-show requirements are huge.

JON: We now have one full-time employee to help us handle everything. It's an awesome responsibility. When you're thinking logistics, we really needed another person to help us set up, pack and unpack, and transport all the necessary stage equipment.

JUGGLE: I understand you've taken yet another important step with this routine.

OWEN: That's correct. We had a master prop- and set-designer, Steve Keilor, build a freestanding rigging, which can be used anywhere, indoors or out. It's the perfect solution for hotels, convention centers, corporate shows, and even some television studios. The rigging is strong and secure, and it breaks down into four giant cases, which travel by truck to each show.

JUGGLE: It just continues to grow, doesn't it?

JON: One small step for mankind...

OWEN: ...one giant leap for jugglers!

JUGGLE: Thanks, guys! We're signing off!

*Chip Lowell is a full-time comedian and writer. He is currently putting the finishing touches on Entertaining the Jury, a new book for performers which will be in book stores next year.*