Practices

Juggling

Stewart Lawrence Sinclair

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The author busking in New Orleans, 2014. Photo by Antoine E. R. Delaunay

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A series edited by Margret Grebowicz

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Juggling by Stewart Lawrence Sinclair
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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Durham and London
2023

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Lisa Lawley
Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher
Typeset in Untitled Serif and General Sans
by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Sinclair, Stewart Lawrence, [date] author.
Title: Juggling / Stewart Lawrence Sinclair.
Other titles: Practices.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2023. | Series: Practices | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022041849 (print)
LCCN 2022041850 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478019602 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478016960 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478024231 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Sinclair, Stewart Lawrence, 1989- | Juggling—History. | Hobbies—Social aspects. | Performance—Psychological aspects. | BISAC: CRAFTS & HOBBIES / General LCGFT: Personal narratives. | Creative nonfiction.
Classification: LCC GV1558 .S56 2023 (print) | LCC GV1558 (ebook) | DDC 793.8/7—dc23/eng/20220831
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022041849
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022041850

Cover text handwritten by Stewart Lawrence Sinclair.

Dedicated to
John and Cherie Brant
and
Kat and Scotty Meltzer
and
everyone seeking a respite
from hard times

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book owes its existence not only to the support of so many family members and friends but also to the work of countless professional jugglers and circus enthusiasts. I am indebted to David Caine and his Museum of Juggling History and to the work that Thom Wall is producing at Modern Vaudeville Press. Wall's *Juggling: From Antiquity to the Middle Ages* was my main source for the much briefer overview of that history that I provide in chapter 4. I hope that interested readers will look into the work of his press for a deeper view of juggling's history and other great books on the circus arts.

I also owe a debt to the performances, experiments, and lessons of Sean McKinney, Jason Garfield, Taylor Glenn, and so many other jugglers I have long admired, with a special acknowledgment to Jay Gilligan, who was kind enough to review the chapter pertaining to his work. Jay's kindness is legendary and was borne out in my interactions with him.

I'd like to also single out Bobby Hartman for taking the time to review some truly difficult passages in this book. I am grateful for his longtime friendship and guidance, but in this moment, I am especially grateful for his love and compassion—and his willingness to revisit painful memories to help make sure I got them right. Or, at least, as right as I could.

This book is an attempt to present this strange juggling subculture to readers who may never before have given it a second thought. To that end, I hope I've represented its practitioners' work well in the following pages, and I profusely apologize for the ways in which I might have fallen short. I hope that nonjuggling readers will see my book as a starting point—a brief, sweeping survey—that might inspire them to dig deeper; to learn to juggle; and to appreciate the artistry, skill, history, science, and sport of juggling. And I hope jugglers who read this book might feel that it resonates with their own experiences.

I want to thank my friend and mentor Christopher Schaberg, who, for many years, has believed in me as a writer—in many moments when I didn't believe in myself—and has set a standard of excellence in compassionate and earnest teaching that I've used to evaluate every professor I've studied under since.

I also wrote this book with my mentor John Brant and his wife, Cherie, heavily on my mind, along with all the people who taught me to juggle when I was a lost child. I couldn't possibly name them all, but to Monica, Dennis, Jeff, Chuck, Shane, and all the other Gold Coast Jugglers and all the staff and kids at the Boys & Girls Club, this book is very much for you.

Likewise, this book is for my mother and father; my stepfather; my brothers and sisters, Callie, Amy, Katherine, Charlotte, Paul, Jenny, and Steven; and all sixteen (at last count) of

my nieces and nephews, with a special callout to my nephew Ronnie, who celebrated his seventeenth birthday as I wrote this book, and who received his heart transplant as I was wrapping up the edits. His courage has been an unending source of inspiration.

I want to thank Kat and Scotty Meltzer for mentoring me as a juggler and writer from the days when I was a mere boy and a beardless youth. Kat and Scotty spent an unreasonable amount of time poring over this manuscript in its final stretch, injecting layers of their brilliance and humor in just the right places. And I want to thank Sarah Tan for providing several wonderful illustrations.

There are also countless friends and mentors who loaned their support and encouragement: Andrew Lorelli, Elexis Williams Grey, Lucas Zucker, Jason Jones, Carey Herman, John Biguenet, Anya Groner, Sandra Mullin, Michelle Valladares, Salar Abdoh, Mikhal Dekel, Yana Joseph, Stephanie Gaitán, and David Groff, to name a few. But it was Danielle Cecala without whom I could not have done this. More than anyone else, it was Danielle who sustained me.

If this were a vaudeville show, the hooked cane would already be around my neck, so I'll end with this: I always thought that I shouldn't write a book about juggling because nobody would read it. It was sheer luck that I learned about Margret Griebowicz's Practices series, and that chance bit of luck allowed me the opportunity to write the story I'd been avoiding my whole life. I want to thank Margret, Ben, Lisa, Elizabeth, and the whole team at Duke University Press for believing that such a world might be worth exploring; I hope my portrayal has done it some justice.

1 Cirque du COVID

ON AN AUGUST FRIDAY EVENING in New Orleans, I sat on a curb, sweat dripping into the gutter outside Big Daddy's World-Famous Love Acts. There was a crowd, but the human current flowing down Bourbon Street had grown so strong that I didn't think I could slow the tide long enough to perform. I just sat in the gutter—the bank of that river of revelry. In my duffel bag were the props I'd been juggling for the last several hours. Between my legs, a floppy woven hat I'd brought from California. I reached into the hat and counted my take: eighty-seven dollars, two condoms, and a copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Don't count your money in the street. I should've known but hadn't internalized that lesson until I looked up and saw a man staring at me. He didn't immediately seem intimidating. Just a diminutive late-middle-aged man, cropped gray hair, loose wife-beater, and denim jeans. He looked like he'd been dry aged in a barrel of Lou Reed lyrics. I tucked the bills into my hat and stuffed it in my duffel bag just as the man approached.

"You look thirsty," he said.

"I'll be alright."

"Lemme getchoo a drink."

"It's ok."

"Whatcha drink?"

I took him in, no longer worried about my money but unsure what to make of him. His face was creased, but gentle. He seemed lonely.

"Maybe water."

"Anything else?"

I was twenty, new to New Orleans, and unsure how to answer. But as I melted into the pavement on Bourbon Street, circumstances dictated the response.

"Whiskey?"

"Any whiskey?"

I named the only brand I knew.

"Jack Daniels."

He disappeared up the street.

I contemplated moving. I was ready to leave anyway, and if he returned with a go-cup, I wouldn't be brave or foolish enough to drink from it. But I believed he was acting out of kindness, and that if I disappeared before he returned, it might break his heart, or worse. So I waited, and the cacophony of Bourbon Street grew louder, revelers descending further into madness as they flowed by, and the sky was purple and pink and the neon lights shined down on the slurry flowing into the gutter.

Then he was back with a brown paper bag containing two bottles of water and an unopened fifth of Jack Daniels. He asked to sit down.

We talked a while. I told him I'd come from California as an AmeriCorps volunteer, that I was staying with my brother in Metairie, that I was trying my hand at busking so I could move out before his baby was born and they'd need the spare bedroom.

Then I asked about him.

"I been here thirty years."

"What brought you?"

"I came to help my friend die."

His friend was his lover. His lover contracted HIV in the early years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. His lover died holding his hand.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's what brought me here."

He put his hands on his knees and pushed up off the curb.

"Enjoy the whiskey."

"See you around."

"We'll see."

My escape from inescapable circumstances is juggling. For the last year, I've been going out beneath an oak tree in a park near my apartment in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, to juggle. No performance. No hat on the ground. Just for me.

The night we went into lockdown, I sat with friends in our office after the evening's classes at City College in Harlem, drinking the bottle of whiskey I kept stowed away for special occasions. Four of us adjuncts shared that office, and slowly we realized it might be a long time before we'd see the inside of it again. One guessed until the end of the semester. Another

guessed a year. All anyone knew for certain was that SARS-COV-2 was here, it was deadly, and we needed to go home.

Still, we stayed in that petri dish of an office—hand sanitizer on the desk like it was supposed to ward off a plague. We killed the whiskey while listening to The Smiths, reflecting on death, disease, and how Morrissey's voice sounds eerily similar to Kermit the Frog's.

The bottle empty, we embraced for the last time. Then I made the two-hour ride from 125th Street to 18th Avenue in Bensonhurst, arriving at home, where the anxious uncertainty washed over me.

Danielle, my girlfriend of eight years, was a social worker at NYU Langone Hospital. The hospital moved her unit out of the building to convert it into a COVID isolation ward. Resettled off-site, Danielle waited anxiously to be declared *nonessential*. That happened a week after the lockdown, after which she was assigned a new responsibility: following up with discharged COVID patients.

The task offered a glint of hope. Danielle's patients had gone through the worst and lived. But even that assignment bore the surreal hallmarks of those early days. One patient had been hospitalized and intubated along with her husband. The husband was discharged first. When the wife came home a few days later, she found him dead.

Days passed like that. Danielle making calls from the bedroom while I conducted my writing classes from the living room. Sirens sang like roosters at dawn, when families awoke to breathless loved ones, and reached a second crescendo when the night brought worsening symptoms. Whenever lights

flashed outside, we peered through our windows to see who'd be brought out.

Meanwhile, each day seemed to bring another announcement from our college beginning with the words, "It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of . . ."

Harlem was hit hard. My classes focused more on working through each week—on coping.

Three weeks into the lockdown, the pressure of isolation built to a head. If everyone was going to bake sourdough, I was going to adopt my own means of distraction.

Danielle worried about my spending time outside. Every day brought more cases, more deaths. Still, I suggested it would be good to get out, if possible. We live on the first floor of a small apartment complex, next to the exit. Our block was near some parks and a promenade that lines the water from Coney Island to Bay Ridge. If we had to let go of everything else, at least we could still have this. With that, I grabbed my props and we stepped outside.

Much like in the French Quarter, it was difficult to find space to juggle. In New Orleans, I navigated other buskers and police restrictions. Here, I'd stopped juggling because it attracts people—ideal when busking, less so when trying to enjoy yourself. People become curious. Old men alight with boyish grins, mothers look up, point, and share a moment with their kids. People forget themselves. Children run toward you, and in a socially distanced world, I worried such encounters might be fatal.

We crossed the overpass above the Belt Parkway. A breeze flitted off the water and cooled our faces. The sun shone above the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Normally, cargo and cruise

ships loomed into the harbor—not anymore. Now, yachts dotted the bay—each occupied by a colony of wealthy individuals who'd found another painfully visible respite from the world's suffering.

Fuck 'em.

I found a grassy nook where the overpass ended and dropped my bag. Danielle, like anyone who's ever dated a juggler, had no interest in watching me juggle. She headed down the path.

My props are showgirl-lipstick red. They pop against the blue sky. I started with four clubs, a pattern that at its most basic involves juggling two in each hand, throwing them in either two cascading ellipses called fountains, or in columns where none of the clubs crosses paths, like four chimney chutes. Each club flips twice before you catch it. The pattern is tricky. The handles slap your forearms, a dull sting that after hundreds of throws leaves welts where the clubs most frequently strike. It's partly because the pattern inflicts pain that it feels so rewarding when it clicks. It also has a nice height to it—high enough to catch people's attention. Sure enough, I looked up and the overpass was lined with people, phones held against the fence.

I've always found it difficult not to put on a show for people. It's hard to look at a delighted face and then deprive them of that joy—especially when the lockdown had done just that to all of us. It's not that I felt some burden of responsibility. It's more that I was presented with the opportunity to make people forget, if only for a moment, that the world was falling apart.

Maybe that's what I offered that man on Bourbon Street. He must've watched me juggle before I finally crumbled onto the curb. Maybe the sight pulled him out of a memory.

1.1 The author in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, 2020. Photo by Danielle Cecala

Maybe I *reminded* him of the man for whom he'd come to New Orleans all those years ago to love and care for amid another pandemic. Maybe I had his eyes. Maybe seeing me slumped, exhausted, and soaked in sweat reminded him of some day long ago when he and his friend sat in that same gutter, wondering what was next.

Maybe it was none of that. I never know what makes people stop to watch me, approach me, buy me whiskey, tell me their stories. I suspect people come across someone like me juggling in the street, and if they pay any attention at all, they get lost in the strange amalgam of skill and nonsense that constitutes

this craft—and maybe that's what makes them want to tell a stranger about themselves.

Whatever it is, years of incidental connections have rendered me almost incapable of denying people a show. It's that inability to juggle for juggling's sake that led me, for years, to relegate my props to the closet. That is, until the lockdown. Now, once again, I found myself juggling while the world burned, trying to maintain, and sometimes inadvertently helping someone else do the same.

Everything you need to learn to juggle is in this book, if you want. But there are better books for that. This is more about what it means—if anything—to be a juggler. Read on, have faith in the pattern. The objects will fall into place.