



Collections • **Drexel University**

Cirque du Soleil's Philadelphia juggler, raising the bar



Philadelphia's Greg Kennedy plays a Darwinesque scientist working with a monkey lab assistant in his juggling act for Cirque du Soleil's "Totem," which will open at the Camden Waterfront on Thursday. (FRANCOIS-LACASSE)

By Elizabeth Horkley, Inquirer Staff Writer

POSTED: May 29, 2013

It all began with a turtle - the origins of life, that is. Or at least that's how the producers of Cirque Du Soleil imagine it in Cirque's *Totem*, which opens on the Camden Waterfront on Thursday, tells the story of humanity's journey from amphibian deapths to "its ultimate desire to fly."

There will be plenty of flying, of course, given Cirque du Soleil's brand of gravity-defying theatrics - trapeze artists, aerialists, unicyclists, and, of course, acrobats.

But people won't be the only things zipping through the air: *Totem* also features lots of juggling, with a highlighted sequence by Greg Kennedy. Having been on the road with *Totem* for three years, the Philadelphian is looking forward to a stint at home.

As a kid, Kennedy tried team sports but found he was really attuned to more individualistic activities.

He liked skateboarding because he could invent his own tricks. And soon enough, he realized he could do the same thing with juggling.

By the time he was a teenager at Conestoga High School in Berwyn, he had grown bored by three-balls-in-the-air party-trick routines and began to experiment with shapes and surfaces. He replaced standard balls, clubs, and rings with sculptures and sticks, which he tried rolling and bouncing off surfaces instead of throwing them in the air.

By his early 20s, he was inventing forms of the art - what he calls "modern juggling."

"We have loosened the definition from just throw-and-catch to any sort of exchange of objects through the hands in some sort of motion," he explains.

Despite his Drexel University engineering degree and subsequent work as a civil engineer, Kennedy, now 42, never abandoned his passion and continued to develop innovative techniques - often employing engineering principles in what he was doing. But after winning the International Jugglers Association Championship in 1996, he took aleave of absence from engineering and never returned. As a professional juggler, with circus-school training in France, he devel-oped a breadth of work informed by his years at Drexel.

"It's essentially taking the properties of physics I learned in engineering school and applying them to juggling," he says of his style.

This knowledge of juggling physics helped him develop his signature "cone act," which involves bouncing balls off the walls of a transparent cone large enough for him to stand in.

"I threw it up on YouTube, and it got a couple million hits there," he says off handedly.

Eventually, his stylings caught the attention of Cirque du Soleil, which he joined in 2009, after a dozen years of successful freelancing.

In the current incarnation of his cone act, Kennedy dons a fake beard and lab coat to become a Darwinesque scientist, frenziedly juggling five balls - molecules? planets? - as his monkey lab assistant looks on.

The character is Kennedy's first foray into acting. He worked with noted Canadian writer/director Robert Lepage to incorporate his juggling techniques and even his personality into the role. Cirque du Soleil often works with performers to continuously develop acts.

The company also works with its artists in other capacities - one of the things that most attracted Kennedy. The father of three, he initially was hesitant to join the tour, but managers simply told him to bring his family along, as some of the other performers did.

Kennedy couldn't be happier with the experience, especially the relationships he has formed and the excellent education his children receive from Cirque's tutors. Nevertheless, he is excited about the collision of worlds that will take place when the family returns to Philadelphia, home of his wife Shana's the Philadelphia School of Circus Arts. A trained aerialist, she founded the Germantown school in 2008 and oversees it long-distance while on the road with Kennedy and Cirque.

"I've grown a second family here at *Totem* with all the other performers and technicians," Kennedy says. "And so I think one of the great things I feel about coming back to Philadelphia for a little while is being able to introduce those two families to one another."

These meetings of past and present illustrate the progress Kennedy has made since he was a kid trying to find his voice as an artist. They also draw a parallel to the changes his performance has undergone. Because of the show's liberal policy of improvisation, "we create new things, stronger things."

"It's like evolution," he says, nodding to his onstage Darwin persona. "I guess that makes sense."

Performance

Cirque du Soleil: Totem

Thursday through June 30, Cooper Street and Delaware Avenue, Camden. Tickets: \$50-\$130 (\$10 discount for children 2-12).Information: 1-800-450-1480 or www.cirquedusoleil.com/totem.