Arts & Humanities

A Fling and a Prayer

By
Jeremy Smerd '03JRN
|
Spring 2006

The Great Throwdini always aims to miss. And in this regard, he is indeed great. Of the 10 female assistants who have accompanied the theatrical knife thrower at various circus shows, including Sideshow by the Seashore at Coney Island, and around whom he has thrown knives, axes, tomahawks, machetes, and other instruments of the impalement arts for the past four years, none has been seriously hurt. A handful of times, a knife has bounced off the wooden board that his assistant stands against, known as “The Wheel of Death,” and scraped her on its way out.

“We try not to think about ‘oops,’” says Throwdini, who is the Reverend Dr. David Adamovich ’75TC offstage. “When you live on the edge, you understand what the risks are. You have to respect the fact that you’re on the edge.”

The edge is a recurring metaphor in the lexicon of Throwdini along with other choice words, like death. He is an entertainer at heart. Last summer, Throwdini opened an off-Broadway version of his act along with his current assistant, Ekaterina Sknarina, a former rhythmic gymnast originally from Russia, and Chris McDaniels, a gunslinging, trick-roping cowboy. The show, which recently closed, was called Maximum Risk: World Champions on the Edge.

Wherever he performs, Throwdini fills his audience with the adrenaline of anxiety and dread as he throws his assortment of cutlery underhand, overhand, and, yes, blindfolded at the beautiful, 23-year-old Sknarina, contortionist and target girl.“I bring them to the edge of their seats, and I let them slide back,”Throwdini says.

Sknarina has been Throwdini’s assistant for two years. She no longer closes her eyes or holds her breath when the knives come at her at 30 miles an hour.Theirs is a close personal friendship. “When you get to the point where you can trust him with a knife, you can trust him with anything in everyday life,” she says.

Winter is a slow time for theatrical knife throwers and their assistants. In the off-season, Sknarina works as a fashion stylist for a company that produces television ads. Throwdini landed a gig this winter appearing on the ESPN sports show Cold Pizza, prognosticating the winner of NFL games with a blindfolded toss of the knife. During the regular season his happenstance methodology accurately predicted the winner, against the spread, 55 percent of the time.

Throwdini, whose plain eyeglasses and neat, side-parted hair lend him a mild resemblance to Kentucky senator Mitch McConnell, wore a tuxedo and red bow tie on the show's television set in a midtown Manhattan studio recently. He carried his knives in a bait-and-tackle box and was greeted with typical ESPN wisecracks.

"Uh-oh, it's throw time!" cohost Jay Crawford exclaimed.

Throwdini then accurately picked three out of the four winning teams in that week's playoffs.

While in the guise of a knife thrower, Throwdini tends to speak melodramatically, as if he's rehearsing his lines. But when his cell phone rings, he answers in a soft voice, saying," Hi, Dr. Adamovich here."

Adamovich, 59, earned his doctorate in exercise physiology at Columbia's Teachers College and taught the subject at Long Island University for 18 years. He became the vice president of an emergency medicine management company but was laid off after four years. So he bought a billiards hall in Bay Shore, Long Island, where a regular introduced him to knife throwing. Somewhere along the line, he trained as a paramedic, a professional chef, and a nondenominational minister.

Sometimes, his many identities intersect.As a paramedic, he revived a patient using a defibrillator.When the patient later died at the hospital, the family asked him to preside over the funeral. At weddings, he has been both the entertainment and the officiant.

"I'll marry them, I'll bury them, but I will not talk theology, philosophy, or politics," he says. "That always starts a fight."

Nor will he discuss the role of the divine in the impalement arts. He says practice and sharp hand-eye coordination, not faith, have made him the fastest and most accurate knife thrower in the world.To prove it, Throwdini conceptualized, then

executed, three records that remain unmatched today. He holds two records for the number of knives thrown around a girl in one minute: 75 knives thrown one at a time, and 144 thrown three at a time.Alongside another knife thrower, he executed a third record, which he calls the “double ladder of death.” Each thrower hurled eight knives across a girl’s body from eight feet away in less than 6.5 seconds.

At home in Freeport, Long Island, Throwdini came up with a trick that ought to be in the record books. He asked his wife, Barbara, also a champion knife thrower but not an entertainer, to throw knives around him. As one of the knives spun toward him, end over end, Throwdini reached out and grabbed it by the handle. “She said, ‘You’re out of your mind,’” says Throwdini. “I said, ‘I don’t do anything where I’m not in control.’” To Throwdini, it seems, fear is pleasure and usually can be conquered with that mysterious skill in his right arm.To explain, he refers us to his favorite flick, Girl on the Bridge, an absurdist tale of a knife thrower’s desperate passion. Dramatically, he quotes: “You don’t take luck. You make it.”

Read more from ***Jeremy Smerd '03JRN***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from ***Jeremy Smerd '03JRN***