



ADVERTISEMENT

CONVERSATION:

VALENTIN LECHATRYAN BRYLE
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CULTURE

I started juggling at 11 years old so it is part of my life. I will never really quit it; I could do something else for a while maybe and I will still always go back to it. Juggling brings the life in me. To me, if I feel bad I would want to do some juggling. Even if someone drugged me without my consent, if I do some juggling, I'd know where I am and I'll be fine. And that really happened to me in Thailand. They probably thought I should be dead, but yeah, I juggled 7 balls.

[Valentin Lechat](#) is known mostly around Taipei for his engaging and amusing 'juggling' performances. But for discerning audiences, there is much more to be taken away from each of his displays of substance, which he puts forth through theatricality and the circus arts.

I for one heard of him through his impressive participation at the Red Room Anniversary, which undoubtedly ended up as one of the day's highlights. With interests peaked, I was eager to meet up and find out more about this deft virtuoso of movements, and not only did I get my tête-à-tête with the man, I got to see him and his little mini-me do a private show just for quint. Of course, there was a lot of dancing and cheering on my part!

How did you end up in Taiwan?

I left France in 2005. I wanted to quit everything I was doing because I did the circus so early. I was 20 and I was doing many circus shows all around. So I left and I thought about doing carpentry. By then I was attracted to doing everything the Asian way – the food, the women, everything! So I started my journey in Lithuania and from there I travelled without taking an airplane. I took a train and I stopped for 2 months in Mongolia. Then I ended up in China, took a boat to Korea, then another boat to Japan. To enter Japan, I had to try twice because they refused me at the border the first time. After 3 months there I moved to Taiwan to join my friend who was already settled down here. I didn't have much money at this point so I thought maybe it's time to stop for a little bit. So I ended up getting back to the routine and doing the things I do again.

Is there anything in particular that you like about Taiwan?

I've lived here for 8 years. I like the time Taiwan gives us – to experiment, to find a way of living easy, to have self introspection, training, and practicing. Also the Taiwanese are not very connected to what is happening in Europe. You are away from comments and feedbacks and you can just try things by yourself (without much criticism).

I was frustrated with everyone trying to tell you something and the culture is strong so it's heavy on your head and you are doing things just because. I felt like you cannot be outside of this system. The system is strong and so if you are an artist, most of the time in France, you cannot do it differently. I'm very sensitive and I can be disturbed quite easily. So yeah, Taiwan has given me that opportunity, that freedom of isolation from many external factors.

I know that you started juggling at the age of 11. How does a young boy even seriously decide on juggling?

One day I opened a drawer at my uncle's house and found 3 juggling balls. I asked him what they were and their use and so he showed me. Within an hour I could juggle all of them almost better than my uncle. I had a lot of fun and from then on I never stopped. I was captivated and I was fascinated by the idea of juggling being a gift to me and if I'm made for it.

So I read a lot of books about it trying to learn everything I could and meeting with a circus crew for teenagers until I was too involved. I remember, around 15 years old, when I decided to carry a ball around with me all the time. I slept with it, I ate with it, I showered with it and never put it away. That's when people in school, my parents, and everyone just understood that it was something I wanted to do, so they recommended that I go to a specialised school. So I left my high school when I was 16 and stopped for one year to prepare and improve my technique to get into pre-professional circus school. During this period I just learned from yoga and theatre. I got in eventually but I also left that when I was 19 because it was too intense. I wanted to learn by myself.

Well today, you have made a long career out of it; you've even performed in a circus. What is that like? I've never ever seen one – I'm very curious! Is it still a popular concept back home?

France is one of the best places to be in the world for circus because the government still sponsors the culture of circus. You have a lot of circus schools and people all over the world come to France to study.

But basically you have the three types – the traditional circus, the new circus, and the contemporary circus, all of them are different. In the traditional one you have animals and every stereotype is there, such as the clown and bearded women. The new circus is the circus coming from the Americas, like 'Cirque du Soleil' in Quebec, Canada. It adds a story and has grand costumes. For me it's still very much 'entertainment' because it's big, it's colourful, and it's crazy. Contemporary circus on the other hand is more like something that started in France and maybe Germany and England at the same time. People wanted to use the circus to say something different about the circus. So it's not only about adding a story but to completely create a new kind of circus. Like the artists Archaos, Beren, the son of Charlie Chaplin and other people. For example Archaos is like punk circus; there are flames destroying stuff, cars breaking, and everyone's dirty and rock and roll. This is why it's very different. Now, the circus I was with was using juggling art to speak about circus.

Well in Taiwan you are a licensed 'street performer.' Now how do they even evaluate your eligibility? Tell us about the process.

You have to pass an exam. They are organizing themselves more these days and they are following more rules. New rules appeared and it's more difficult for artists or other people to perform... [Brook](#) knows a lot about these rules actually. (We were featured in the same magazine before as well!)

Anyway before I got my license, I played in Ximen and thankfully no one said anything. Sometimes I will go with a Taiwanese person and we'd show his license to be safe. But the process is I had to pass an exam they hold once a year and there's a selection of 300 applicants. They hold it in Sun Yat Sen Park and you repeat your act over and over and there will be examiners going around and they choose the people that pass.

Well now that you've passed, congratulations! Where have you done outside performances since then?

I did some juggling and played the accordion in boats in Kaohsiung, in Ximending, or around 101. Now I'm a permanent act in Huashan Park. But for me, I see it quite differently, it's not really much of a street performance anymore even though I'm outside. I'm more a circus artist there. I have my 'tent' and I sell 'tickets'. The 'tickets' are through people giving whatever they want to give and my 'tent' is invisible, it's just a circle between these trees.

So you don't consider yourself a street performer?

Yeah. They gave me balls with labels that say 'circus street performer' and I changed it to 'circus artist' because that's how I feel. I got some complaints but I kept it anyway because it's true – I'm not a street performer. I had never done street performance before, only in Taiwan. I didn't have much of a choice here. For me it's still me practicing 'theatre' and the way I experiment with my art.

Besides the meaning of a street performer in Chinese is too low so I always explain to them why I'm not a street performer. Also they use a lot of these 'street performers' for events for cheap and the quality is not very good – all of the shows look the same – and they usually do it in front of a big department store...

So it's safe to assume that you prefer performances in more established venues?

Yeah of course. But now that I'm used to doing it in the street I have gained additional skills. Like if I'm doing something in the street – because I'm from the theatre, I'm from the circus – I will think about what is missing that is related to where I'm from and bring those elements to wherever I perform. So I've learned to use the lights of the streets or interacting with a light-box maybe and so on.

Interacting with crowds, I'm sure, is a big part of what you do, is it safe to say that you are a very extroverted person?

I'm shy and I'm not. I'm not automatically extroverted just because I am on stage. The circus is extroverted because of the humour and the act of stimulating the people but also I'm introverted because a lot of times I have to work with objects, my own body, and the movement aside from the crowd. It's like contemporary dance or some sort of distant art. So I'm playing between both personalities.

So, I don't normally want to ask anything related to this... not even to my friends, but I'm really curious. Do you actually earn money doing street performances? Or is it more of a pro-bono, give back to people kind of thing that you do? To be honest... I've also never donated to such a thing. I feel bad now.

It depends greatly. With my permanent stay in Huashan Park, it's actually going pretty good because maybe I've become a spectacle there and I'm gaining popularity. I will never do a show just for money anyway. I don't know how to do this. I will stick with my artistic desires – continuing my work to get to the point I want to go to. It's a good thing that I'm getting popular so that circus art can be promoted and to make people here like it.

Talking about the promotion of it here, is there even a circus scene in Taiwan?

Uhm... yeah kind of. But for me it's not circus. 'Contemporary circus' in Taiwan now is just a business. They are just making big events for companies, temples, and department stores. They are just making acrobatic shows and entertainment shows that clients want to see. Besides when they try to make a contemporary circus show and rent a theatre space and work on an idea, the intermediary people, between the clients and the artists, have no soul and so it never goes well.

Another thing I know about you is that you are also in fact a juggling teacher in a university here. That's a pretty specific role. How do your classes go normally?

The Chinese or Taiwanese Opera have an acrobatic department and everyone learns music, singing, acrobatics, and theatre. Juggling is under acrobatics and so I teach that.

I teach my classes in Mandarin Chinese. I teach them my technique and from there I try to let them understand the freedom that these techniques can give them. I just teach them the movements I could do and just decompose it and explain it and make some games with the group. Before I wanted to be more focus on performing, but now I like improvising with them and giving them some individual solo exercises.

Contrary to that teaching title though, when you do your own performances you don't just juggle a bunch of things and call it a day. As you said you are from the theatre, the circus, so how would you describe your performances exactly?

I wrote on my website 'juggling curiosity' but it's more contemporary art, but popular, not elitist. Before I tried to do special things and weird things with my art but I didn't and will not make a living that way. Juggling is too poor and juggling art is not considered in the same way as other arts. I don't want to stick with just the high society things. I think because my work is suited for and near the people, but still keeps the artistic integrity, people can understand or even gain more capacity to understand more. Basically I want it to be like a movie. What I'm doing is quite like a movie, I really believe that. It's not like a piece but more like a movie; I have to redo this movie every time. It's like a polymorph movie. Part of my show in Huashan is actually inspired by a movie by Quentin Dupieux called Rubber. It's a movie about a tire with psychic power and kills everyone. It's a surrealistically absurd movie and I really like this because I have a special relationship with objects.

Aside from theatre, what inspires you?

So as I said, movies, like ones from Takeshi Kitano, books, other artists' works, or things such as ethnology, or even scientists. People making things and devoted to their passion and the things they're doing – that inspires me. I like people that do everything by themselves. I don't like watching things like TED talks. I like searching inspiration in my own ways.

I like Ted Talks....

I mean I like it but also I don't like it. It's too produced. It's like a product and you have the design and it's too processed and it's always presented almost the same way... I do watch it sometimes but just by random.

Taiwan seems to embrace your chosen art form quite warmly. I've even seen videos of you performing on Taiwanese television? What was that like?

Television is very hard because it's a lot of pressure. They want the final product to be fast and really perfect. So you have to be well prepared and they are not very considerate about what's happening. It was fun to go on air and experience it but I don't really have the desire to do it too often. So yeah, I won't try to be in every primetime show or anything. They asked weird questions to me that I tried to avoid answering. I remember they asked me something like 'oh what do you eat?' and so I try to make bad jokes that they can't release on TV so I know what they'd release. Last time I was on TV my ears were red because they forgot to do my makeup and so I did it myself and the host saw it and made comments about it...

Sounds a bit weird. Do you think that the audience there or the host understood your performance the way you wanted to portray it?

I didn't do my usual routine. They asked me to do my show but I only had 3 minutes so they say put the most amazing things all together. And I had to send them a few videos before I went and they called a lot of times and it wasn't even that well paid. A lot of people think that when you appear in TV here that you are immediately 'different'... for me it's very annoying.

Do you get recognised when you are out? If so what are the usual remarks people give you?

Yeah people recognise me and say 'Oh yeah I saw you on TV! Let's take a picture together!' They will compliment me and will often say that I must work hard and put a lot of effort and that I must be tired and at first I would say 'oh thank you thank you' but now I say no I'm not tired at all. I guess they see me moving a lot and they don't know what else to say so they say that. So now I reply that I'm not tired, it's nothing, I'm used to it. But when people ask me things sometimes it's all the same so yeah maybe they don't get it that much... so then I just play with the stereotypes to make fun and to be tricky and make something shocking happen.

What's the most awkward conversation you had with a viewer?

Last year, there's this one guy that came to me after the show and said 'you touched my dick during the show'. But I was blindfolded actually so I just said 'uh yeah.... and?' So that was that.

You already mentioned that what you do, especially juggling, is not regarded in the same light as other arts; that making a living with it is quite hard too. So why do you keep doing it? What makes you keep going?

I will say this... I like art and I like making art and I don't want to stop. For me juggling is art and it's like life. It's like breathing; you can look for every kind of meaning with breathing but you still need it; that's juggling for me. It's a gift to my life and I want to give back to this art. And also to different arts around for this matter. Especially for the past 5 years, I've been practising high skilled Qi Gong here in Taiwan. It's healing and breathing I can actually combine with juggling now. So more than ever when I'm juggling there's more and more meaning to it. I can cultivate more power inside my body, keep healthy, and do things till I'm old. As much as our society needs poets, and if there is room for these people that use metaphors to explain things, then there is a place for us jugglers that create and make things. I mean the world even needs monks, and monks seem quite useless to me most of the time... But most of all, if I'm not juggling, I need to go back to it to feel like myself again. It's my freedom, but the weird thing is that if I actually stop it I don't feel free and I lose my stability.

I need it to stay sane.

I attain peace through juggling. It's the infinity movement.