

Don't Drop the Ball: Object Manipulation

A crystal ball. An oversized dog dish. An umbrella. A small child. These are just a few of the objects that Greg Tarlin, juggler extraordinaire, manipulates in his action-packed, comedic performances. If that's not enough, he rides a unicycle, while juggling with one hand, spinning a tray in the other and all the while spinning a plate that is balancing on top of a perch he is holding in his mouth!

Object manipulation is an ancient artform that has had a place in circus since circus was born. Unlike its siblings, aerial and balancing, object manipulation may not seem very serious. It is not about the tension and the drama of tumbling from the sky. It is not about walking a fine line high above a crowd. In fact, Greg feels as though it is perhaps "inherently silly."

That doesn't diminish the impact that a truly great manipulator can have on an audience and it doesn't mean that in the contemporary circus world object manipulation cannot be a serious feat. I think back to this past Autumn and sitting in the audience at *Cirque du Soleil's* latest show, *Kurios*. I watched as a man clad in vintage pilot's garb dismantled his "plane" and began a rola bola act that had the whole audience on edge. How is he doing that? He's adding another platform? How high will he climb? Will he fall? It was truly incredible and mind-boggling to watch!

That's just not Greg's current style though. In his performances, which often include his partner and wife Kristi Heath, or Madame Buskerfly as she is known in her acts, Greg draws his audiences into the action through light-hearted antics and strong circus skills. Recently, comedy variety shows have been the focus for the duo and most of their audiences made up of families and school children. The two have written and produced a number of shows for the Ontario Science Centre which combine science themes with circus skills to teach physics, under the moniker [Fizzical Fizzicks](#). Manipulation skills like juggling, stilt-walking, unicycling yo-yoing, and hula hooping teach young audiences the themes of force and motion in the most fun way possible!

It hasn't always been this way though. Like many others, Greg began his career in his late teens and early twenties as a street performer. Comedy was important during his years of busking, but so was an element of danger. During his busking days at local Toronto haunts like the Harbourfront Centre, his shows needed to be spectacular and fast paced or people could and would just walk away.

Manipulators use all sorts of tricks to grab people's attention. One of the most important elements for a street performer is to get above the crowd and improve sightlines. Greg used a tall unicycle, a common trick, but others use unsupported ladders, stilts, or rolo bolas on top of tables or cases to achieve verticality. A more recent trend is to simply climb to the top of a tall pole which is held in place by a number of volunteers with ropes. One benefit of adding height is that it also adds that element of danger and that keeps interests piqued.

As a juggler, using dangerous props is another “easy” way to make manipulation skills more compelling. Juggling fire or knives while on a tall unicycle is going to garner a fair few gasps from an audience! Greg created and used a routine for a few years which saw him juggling a lit torch, a machete, and a running weed eater. It wasn’t exactly a chainsaw, but not many people would want to tangle with a that trio, which adds just enough suspense to keep a fickle street audience around to see what happens next, or a theatre audience on the edge of their seats!

Like all great performers, Greg continues to challenge himself and others around him by constantly adding to his skills. Circus Sessions is another opportunity for this mostly solo performer to collaborate with like-minded people. Whether slapstick or serious, his act continues to evolve, grow and change and we will wait to be amazed!