

# A juggling act

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The Passing Zone are like Penn & Teller (but cleaner), The Smothers Brothers (but hipper), Ringling Brothers (sans bearded lady) and Cirque du Soleil (but less French) all in one.

In their new show “Gravity Attacks,” coming to the Lincoln Center on Oct. 8, Jon Wee and Owen Morse invite the audience to join them in their fight against what they consider one of the world’s most evil forces — gravity.

The five-time Guinness World Juggling Record holders will juggle such friendly objects as chainsaws, torches and knives with the greatest of ease. Even audience members will be getting in on the act, as objects to be juggled anyway.

The Coloradoan talked with this dynamic duo recently to find out what draws someone to juggle chainsaws, in ballet tights no less (hence the name of the skit “The Chainsaw Ballet”), and how they hassled The Hoff into admitting that he likes juggling.

**So when did you go from juggling normal stuff to... insane stuff?**

**Jon:** The crazy stuff started probably earlier than it should. Even as a kid just learning to juggle — from the time I was able to flip a club I started trying to figure out, you know, can we light the end of this on fire and have a torch, and can I juggle one of the knives from the kitchen, that sort of thing. Maybe it’s one of those ingrained things to want to

make something crazier and more dangerous.

**Owen:** I can recall getting a tennis ball and thinking that I should light it on fire and just juggle it with socks over my hands and that that would be a pretty cool thing. Turns out (lit) tennis balls start to

melt; the rubber starts to stick to your hands. Then the socks catch on fire. You learn pretty quickly that that’s not really that smart.

**J:** One of the things you quickly learn as a juggler is how fire behaves in different situations.

**O:** And you make your parents proud...

**J:** It really is a gradual progression. You sort of learn each thing step by

step. You don’t start with something dangerous. First you start with three balls and then when you get good at that then you learn to juggle clubs, and the clubs are really where you learn to flip something one time around, which is pretty crucial in juggling something dangerous. There’s a catching end and then there’s an end that you don’t want to catch. So as soon as you get comfort-

able catching clubs then you think all right, now I can probably do torches. And then a knife. With the chainsaws people often ask, ‘How do you get started on chain-

**So how did you get started juggling chainsaws?**

**J:** That’s one of those things where first you take the blade off and you don’t turn the motor on. You start out in the backyard over soft grass where if you drop it, you won’t break it. Then after awhile when you think you’ve got the flip of it down pretty well, then you turn it on but you still leave the chain off. Then when you think, OK now it’s working fine, then you put the chain on.

**O:** Every level has its own sort of scary properties, a fear factor.

**J:** As crazy as it all seems, we try not to do something that is really stupid or is going to cut off an arm or something until we feel pretty well prepared.

**What’s going through your mind the first time you do a trick fully sans ‘safety net’?**

**O:** Oh please, oh please.

**J:** It is really terrifying, especially performing things like that for the first time. I mean, I remember doing the chainsaw for the first time in front of an audience and I was just terrified. You’re nervous enough because it’s a new routine and dangerous but it’s

**THE PASSING ZONE**  
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**GRAVITY**



**ATTACKS**

★★★★★ STARRING ★★★★★★  
**OWEN MORSE & JON WEE**  
 ★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

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• **When:** 7:30 p.m. Oct. 8 • **Where:** Lincoln Center, 417 W. Magnolia St. • **Cost:** \$29  
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still hard to do something right the first time. For about the first year, (doing the chainsaw ballet) was pretty scary; not as scary as it was then but it still gets the heart rate up. We don’t take it lightly. We often comment that in a full 90 minute show of juggling and catching and comedy no matter how many times

we’ve done it, we still find new places to make mistakes. It keeps us on our toes.

**Speaking of toes, after more than 20 years of doing this how many fingers and toes do you guys have left?**

**J:** I think we’re still at 40 total.

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O: We haven't had anything major (accident wise), a couple scrapes here and there.

J: We have bled onstage a few times... a few sprains and bruises things like that, some falls. Obviously we don't want to give your readers the impression that they're showing up to see some disaster happen, but that is part of the

series of fun comedy stunts but we basically introduce the show as if we are two guys on this quest to defeat gravity. I think too many of us have just come to accept gravity as something that is inevitable, but really it's something we should be fighting. Then one day if we all pull together, we can beat it.

O: A noble quest.

J: So we talk about how as jugglers we're really the only ones who are

and lighter than 200 pounds.)

O: That came about because we'd been juggling chainsaws for a number of years and were trying to figure out a way that we could take juggling to the next level and juggling elephants wasn't much of an option.

J: They're very difficult to house and feed. Oh, and to juggle.

So we were just trying to think of something more outrageous than chainsaws. Then we thought what if we juggled people from the audience.

So we liked that idea but it took a long time to figure out how to make that effective, and how we could really get random people from the audience to successfully juggle

them onstage. It has turned into one of the more popular pieces in the show. When people do it they always ask after if they can do that again. It's kind of like a once-in-a-lifetime carnival ride. And this is one where we never make mistakes.

**What other new things will be in this show?**

J: We do juggling while riding Segway scooters.

O: Also juggling rat traps — and trying not to get snapped.

J: Yes, we're always coming up with new and creative ways in which people can hurt themselves. That's basically what we try to do for people's entertainment.

**Is there anything you draw the line at juggling?**

O: You just can't juggle live animals of any kind, you just can't. The people juggling — they can give you their consent. There's just no way to juggle an animal.

J: Without getting in trouble with some agency or organization. So humans

## On the Internet

Visit [www.coloradoan.com](http://www.coloradoan.com) to get a sneak peek at The Passing Zone.



## Top 5 tips for juggling dangerous items

5. Do it with your eyes closed, because you don't want to lose an eye!
4. To avoid scuffing the floor, juggle dangerous items over a group of soft, fluffy kittens.
3. Sharpen the objects, because everyone knows that a jagged cut is more difficult to stitch.
2. Have 9-1-1 on speed dial.
1. Don't expect to win \$1 million on America's Got Talent! (We're not bitter about it, honestly!)

— Passing Zone



excitement. It's pretty hard to do all of it perfectly all of the time; there has to be some room for some error.

**So your performance at the Lincoln Center will include the Chainsaw Ballet, what else will your new show, "Gravity Attacks," feature?**

J: "Gravity Attacks" is a

taking this seriously. The only ones who day after day, throw after throw, we're fighting gravity every step of the way. But we think we can beat it if we have enough people behind us.

**Is that where juggling audience members comes in? (Before each show, audience members can sign up for a random drawing to be one of three people the duo will juggle on stage. Those who sign up must be taller than 5 feet, 3 inches and shorter than 6 feet, 3 inches and heavier than 100 pounds**



are fair game but not other animals, at least in public, on stage.

O: Sure, on stage.

J: What we do in the privacy of our own homes...

O: My cats love it.

J: Your cats never go near you anymore, Owen.

O: But they do love it.

J: You don't want to catch the wrong end of a cat.

(Thinks a minute) I'm not sure which end that is.

O: Me neither.

J: These are the kind of discussions we have: What's the wrong end of a cat?

O: Is there a wrong end of a cat?

J: I don't think there's a right end of a cat. I'm more of a dog person.

**What are some of the misconceptions about your show?**

J: People don't know what to expect with a juggling show. Often it sounds like it's a kids show, or people are thinking, how am I going to watch you juggle for an hour and a half? It really is important to note that it's a comedy show. It really is about the jokes and

the laughs and the funny situations. Sure there is a lot of juggling — that's what the show is built around — but it really is a comedy show.

**You even restored David Hasselhoff's faith in jugglers.**

O: Ah, a proud moment.

(The Passing Zone were finalists in NBC's "America's Got Talent" where they lost to an 11-year-old but won the affection of judge Hasselhoff, who claimed at their first performance to hate all jugglers.)

J: We turned the Hoff from a juggler hater to a juggler... tolerator. That was tricky; from the very beginning he was basically saying that he hated juggling acts. Great, here we come trying to win a million dollars in a competition, and one of the judges openly hates juggling. We thought, we're not going to get too far here, and yet he liked us, and we got to get him up on stage and threw knives around him and he actually had a really good time.