

Catch as catch can

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Michael Moschen will perform 11 a.m. tomorrow at McCarter Theatre in Princeton.

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'Genius' juggler Michael Moschen is not about to drop his interest in exploring all the possibilities his craft has to offer.

Michael Moschen doesn't have much experience following rules.

He spurned college because he wanted to learn on his own terms, refused to follow a "career track" and to this day hates to be labeled, although the world knows him as perhaps its most famous juggler.

But after spending the last 29 years exploring "the expressive parts of things that don't fall between the narrow lines that seem to govern most things," Moschen is ready to do something surprisingly conventional: copyright his work. "I get letters from people who say 'I'm embarrassed because I've been making my living off your work for seven years, and I feel guilty,' " says Moschen, 49, who may be best known for a piece in which he stands within a triangular structure and bounces balls off the sides, creating a pattern of sounds and shapes.

"I don't want to go there anymore," he says. "It takes a long time to do something interesting and new, and I like to keep respecting that. I don't ever want to have that sense of respect and love for doing that taken from me."

It's no wonder that other jugglers consistently steal the work of the performer, who will be onstage in Princeton tomorrow to open the 2004-05 Family Series at McCarter Theatre.

His art, which won him the MacArthur Foundation's "genius" grant in 1990, goes beyond juggling to include elements of nature, architecture, mathematics and music, communicating his most profound thoughts about humanity.

A piece in which Moschen rolls crystal balls along his hands and arms, making them seem to float, tells the story of his daughter's birth, he says.

And his latest work, an educational piece he hopes to have completed within the next couple of years, "deals with the origins of mathematics and music, because I've never seen what I truly believe about it and, personally and honestly, I believe it's all screwed up in how it's taught."

He calls the piece "the biggest thing I've ever done."

"It's so unbelievably simple and yet so difficult and complex," he says. "I absolutely love it. It's just so cool."

Moschen's enthusiasm about the project isn't unusual. He's felt that way about his work _ and life in general _ from the very beginning.

"I'm addicted to learning, to the sensibility of always searching for new knowledge," says Moschen, who develops his work in a studio on his property in Cornwall, Conn. "I love to perform, to be the interpretive artist, and I also love creating new techniques."

Moschen points to his relatives in explaining how he developed those passions.

"My family, on one side, are all engineers and scientists, and the other half are stonemasons and factory workers," he says, "so I love working with my hands and also love using my brain. The combination of the two and people in my family have inspired me to go after what I truly believe, rather than waste time making work, and do something interesting and really, really hard."

But if he wanted to, Moschen jokes, he could simply blame Penn Jillette _ of Penn & Teller fame _ for dragging him into show business.

Moschen and Jillette lived next door to each other as boys growing up in Greenfield, Mass., and, along with Moschen's brother, learned to juggle together by reading a library book.

They did it to fill time during one boring, country summer, but eventually got good enough to perform for nursing-home residents and a Boy Scout troop, Moschen recalls.

"We had an allegiance to each other as friends, and that can take you in all sorts of directions," says Moschen, who started out preferring a ballfield to a stage. "I'd blame Penn for making me a performer."

It was with Jillette that Moschen got his first taste of professional stage work.

The two were hired to entertain for a summer at Great Adventure in Jackson and, once there, got the chance to do one of their tricks _ deftly passing a number of airborne clubs back and forth _ on TV's "The Mike Douglas Show."

"We passed clubs around the Four Tops," who were also guests on the show that day, Moschen remembers.

"That legitimized us in our own eyes _ and in my parents' eyes," he says. "My parents raced to Penn's parents' house and watched on their color TV."

Soon afterward, Moschen moved to New York City with Jillette, where the two performed as a team. But the union broke up when Jillette left to begin working with Teller and another entertainer.

Moschen worked on his own _ sampling an array of jobs, including stretching animal skins in a leather factory, surveying land, being a carpenter's assistant and making ceramics _ but also kept juggling.

"I believe, in life, that you test yourself," he says. "I did it by working for a carpenter all day long and then coming home and rehearsing all night. I did it for seven months. I thought, 'If I can do this and sustain my love for it, then maybe I belong performing.' "

He must have, because his talents were recognized by the creators of the Big Apple Circus, who hired him as part of the tent show's first cast. Three years later, Moschen joined forces with a dance company, Lotte Goslar's Pantomime Circus, later breaking away to form a duo with clown Bob Berky.

Known as the Alchemedians, Moschen and Berky did work that was "really silly, really fun and really challenging," the juggler remembers, "dancing with 23 kitchen aluminum bowls and doing fanciful alchemical experiments with all different kinds of objects and making a lot of dances and noise and humor.

"We toured for three or four years all over the world and it was an evolution all the way through," Moschen says. "But anybody who looked at my work that knew a lot about the

arts always told me, 'Eventually you'll end up on your own.' I had my own ideas, and I needed to pursue them."

And so he did, refining his work, creating more and making a one-hour solo special for PBS television in the months before he won the \$230,000, five-year "genius" grant.

The way Moschen received the news about the no-strings-attached grant was "hilarious," he recalls.

"I was on the other line renting a truck for a show I was doing," he says, "and I put the foundation on hold to finish renting the truck."

Moschen, who had a wife and a young daughter and had just spent all his money on the PBS special, used the grant funds to "allow my family to be more stable and let me go back to the work I should do," he says.

Fifteen years later, that work runs the gamut from performances at the Kennedy Center Honors to shows at corporate conferences or schools and requires Moschen to travel all over the world.

Between performing, the juggler likes to give talks about the physical and mathematical principles behind his work; he presented the keynote address for the National Conference of Teachers of Mathematics in 1996 and has lectured on innovation and creativity at Carnegie Mellon and MIT.

When he's not rehearsing for a show, Moschen spends his mornings and evenings in his studio, practicing longer than most people would want to work in one day.

"I don't care about time when I'm working on something I love," says Moschen, who has training in ballet, tap, jazz, gymnastics, acrobatics and martial arts. "Time is what it is. It's not going to determine what I do, because I just don't care. I need to work and work

until something is satisfied, until I have uncovered an instinct waiting to be uncovered."

That intensity is one of the things that contributed to Moschen's divorce from his wife, he admits.

"Now I'm trying to understand what it is that does drive the work, because I want to make sure I'm capable of being the best father I can to my daughter," he says. "If you're really driven, work just takes over."

The divorce was only one of the difficult experiences Moschen weathered during the last decade: he also lost his father to Parkinson's disease and watched his mother succumb to Alzheimer's.

But those trials never stopped him from working, he says.

"If you're an artist, you take your fuel from life, from things that happen to you or people you know," he says. "I let what happens in real life wash through my work, inspire the work and challenge me. We're human beings, and we have to express that."

Moschen will try to pass that inspiration along to local children, he says, when he performs at McCarter Theatre.

"I put a premium on showing them it's OK to really get enthusiastic and to love what you do and communicate that," he says.

"One thing that kids really need is to see the human context, because so much is technologically based now. It's just result, result, result, another perfect image after another perfect image, and that's not what people are about."

Michael Moschen will be at McCarter Theatre, 91 University Place, Princeton, tomorrow at 11 a.m. Tickets are \$16. (609) 258-2787 or www.mccarter.org

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