

Inside Fire Jam Gent: Belgium's Fire Performance Underground

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The smell of benzene lingers in the air. At Ledeborg, it is 20:00 when Amayah soaks her fire fan in fuel, walks toward the middle of an empty road, and lights it. Amber shadows flicker on the underside of the bridge. In Belgium, fire performance is in full bloom, and those who practice it will tell you: it is not a hobby, nor a job. It is a language, and not everyone speaks it the same way.

“Fire is something so special and primal that anyway you fall in love with it”

—Lova Willert



Fire has been a fascinating element in entertainment for centuries. Fireworks were among the first manifestations, originating in China as early as the 7th century. Spreading to Europe by the 13th century, fire has been tied to rituals, traditions, and celebrations, says Lova while playing with her hula hoop on top of her head. Now it continues to be a powerful and engaging way to captivate an audience.

After ten minutes, Amayah ends her training, sweat dripping down her face. She is currently doing her PhD in Design Sciences at the University of Antwerp. Two years ago, Amaya met Paloma at a KandilaDance cabaret evening in Ghent. Later, they met at a bar, talked for hours, and eventually began a relationship. Together they do duo performances, and most recently

started a collective named Di Infernati in unity with other artists. Starting last summer, the group now counts six fire artists, each bringing different capabilities, from circus experience to costume design, forming a multidisciplinary collective.

Paloma is the name he uses as an artist, though his real name is Brent. The nickname was given to him by his host family during his studies abroad in Chile. Given that he constantly came back with crazy stories and experiences, "I was always going somewhere, flying and I was picking up stuff at the research. I like the name more, so I took it with me to Belgium."

After a long shift as an occupational therapist at AZ Jan Palfijn, he joins his fellow artists gathered around the campfire. Two years ago, this community was formed by fire performers looking for a place to train safely and responsibly. "Artists come from different backgrounds, some from martial arts, circus juggling, or dance," one of the performers explains. Since then, Fire Jam Gent has grown into a meeting point for enthusiasts of this niche discipline, responding to a rising interest in fire performance across Belgium.



Paloma watches as Jahon spins his dragon staff, a contact staff, through the air while riding his unicycle. As he spins the staff, the flames create spirals of fire on both ends, embers fading into the night. An orange glow reflects across his face, casting shadows that leave only his eyes visible. As music blares through the speakers, his movements flow with the rhythm. "When you see people performing with fire, it always looks very powerful and intimidating," says Paloma while grabbing Jahon's dragon staff.

Their weekly sessions are dedicated to training for events such as Gentse Feesten, private events, and festivals such as the Shambhala Vision Festival. According to Febe, who was introduced to the community by Paloma, this festival was co-created with the collective she is part of, Pirouette Fire Theatre, and Jahon. "A very spiritual and holistic health-based event," she says. For them, fire is not merely a performance tool but a ceremonial one, combining fire arts and spirituality.

It is 21:30 when Febe arrives and greets Lova. She works as a dental assistant and manager at a dental clinic. Without much delay, she begins her training. As she moves, flames from her fans follow her rhythm, becoming part of the choreography rather than a mere visual effect. The atmosphere shifts between power and intimacy, confidence and playfulness dominating the scene. She has been fire performing for almost two years. As she says, "It became a way to reconnect with my femininity, embrace my sensuality, and express myself through movement in a way that words could not," revealing how performers often find in fire not only an artistic practice, but also a deeply personal form of expression.



After Febe completes her training, Lova takes her place in the middle of the empty road. She holds four hula hoops, two in each hand, this time without fire. "Your body knows that you can burn," she says, explaining the relationship of respect that every fire performer must develop with the element. Fire is not approached carelessly; it demands awareness, control, and trust. For this session, she decides to practice without fire, focusing instead on technique and movement. As she lifts the hoops above her head, the street once again becomes her stage.

Lova is a 30-year-old woman, working part-time as an assistant for a girl with a disability. Outside of that, she performs at shows and events. She has been performing with a hoop for ten years and with fire hula hoop for eight years. Without taking any classes, she describes fire performing with a hula hoop as a process of "discovering and researching" what she could do with her body. "It was kind of my meditation moment," she says. Only later did she turn to YouTube tutorials to improve her technique.

Yet beneath all their differences, every fire performer shares one thing. Amayah training between PhD deadlines, Paloma trading a hospital shift for a campfire, Febe rediscovering her body after a day at the dental clinic, Lova turning hula hoops into meditation, whether it's stunt work, flow art, or fire breathing, they all agree on what happens once the flame is lit: fire pulls you into the present moment. As Jahon, community organiser of Fire Jam Gent, puts it, it is a flow state, "you become one with the tool," one with the fire, one with the now.

By the time the last fan burns out, the smell of benzene is still hanging in the air, nothing else exists. Just the flame, and whoever is standing in it.

