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Air Apparent

**Performer Peter Davison
masters the art of juggling
in his life and in his art**

*By Elizabeth Train
Photography by Larry Laszlo*

peter Davison humbly classifies himself as a movement artist. Yet his performances display that he is also a poet, a percussionist, a choreographer, an actor—the list goes on. Peter employs rhythm, light, symbol, and sound in his juggling and dance compositions, creating sensory pieces that stretch the perimeters of balance while challenging the common uses of objects and forms. His actions are intensified and humanized by the spoken word—a relatively new facet of his work—which gives Peter an additional connection to his audience. The timelessness of his whimsical routines insures that Peter's work reaches people of all ages and levels of artistic appreciation.

Peter, from a family of visual, graphic, and film artists, has always been drawn to creative expression, taking a particular liking to Calder's circus pieces and mobiles: art that moves. Peter, however, began a career in which moves *are* art, channeling his sense of balance and grace into juggling. When he was 13, he met Foy and Fay, retired jugglers who became his mentors, and who taught him the fundamentals of performing before an audience. Peter took his juggling to the streets of Los Angeles, working as a vaudevillian-style street performer for several years.

In 1980, he moved to Boulder to work with other performers who were exploring the vast world of movement art. Boulder's affordable studio space and support of the arts were refreshing, and he enjoyed the creativity and inspiration he found in the town. Although Peter began his training as a dancer, juggling was still his main focus, and he was named National Juggling Champion in 1982. However, maintaining the amount of dexterity necessary to perform at this level consumed so much time, he had little space for creativity and personal expression through the juggling medium. He felt the need to move away from the technical side of his trade and to expand creatively.



ARTIST'S WORKSHOP

Peter teamed with two other artists, Jon Held and Kezia Tenebaum, to form "Airjazz," a fusion of dance, theater, music, and juggling. They were excited to explore a new realm of performance art which challenged the traditional aesthetic of juggling and broadened the audiences' definition of the craft. Their first piece, a whimsical composition set to a Benny Goodman tune, was a huge success, and "Airjazz" went on international tour. While best known for this first routine, the group explored more abstract, dance-oriented movement with deeper messages and symbols than those commonly associated with juggling. When the material evolved into a unique collection of pieces that no longer functioned as mere entertainment, "Airjazz" became its own show. The trio appeared on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson in 1984, on the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, and was featured at numerous gala events and festivals. But constant travel left little time for

the members of "Airjazz" to pursue their individual goals as artists, and in 1990 they chose to disband and follow their divergent interests.

Peter began to dance seriously, and, in 1991, became a member of the David Taylor Dance Theatre. His roles included the enigmatic Drosselmeyer in the company's annual rendition of "The Nutcracker"—a part designed specifically for his skills as a juggler.

Through work with David Taylor, the Kim Robards Modern Dance Company, and the Jan Justice Dance Company, Peter was exposed to movement and choreography that greatly influenced his own work.

In 1996, he began performing a one-man show, combining juggling with modern dance skills. He also added poetry and recitation to his work, resolving his long-time sense that a crucial element of communication was missing from his performances. His first solo piece, "Point of View," was performed to spoken ex-

cerpts from letters written by artist Vincent van Gogh to his brother, Theo. Peter danced with a picture frame in this piece, transforming the rectangle into a window, a mirror, and a door, exposing new perspectives on shape, movement, and form as well as on art. "Still Life," a piece he still performs with a newspaper, a ball, and a bottle, transforms the mundane into an exercise in balance and viewpoint.

Nationally recognized for his imaginative perspectives on traditional art, Peter received the Arts Innovation Award from the Colorado Federation of the Arts in 1995 and a performance fellowship from the Colorado Council on the Arts in 1997, allowing him the freedom to focus completely on his craft. He also took the stage at the Cherry Creek Arts Festival in 1997, where his one-man show garnered rave reviews from critics and writers around the globe.

Peter continues to develop and refine the pieces in his show, recently



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ARTIST'S WORKSHOP

titled "Up in the Air," to reflect the juggling we all do in life, and the human struggle to maintain and regain balance and focus. He believes that all aspects of existence can be choreographed, and that everything around and inside of us is in a constant state of change and movement—a fitting *double entendre*, he notes, between the physical movement in his pieces and the constant ebb and flow of life.

Peter does quite a bit of juggling in his own life, balancing family with dancing, teaching, performing, and enjoying a bit of stillness in his garden. Two young children keep Peter and his dancer wife, Ana Claire, on their toes as well.

He participates in performance art education in Boulder, and is currently working on several projects to expand the community's sense of movement art. He founded "Boyz Dance" to encourage young boys to explore classical dance, movement, and, of course, juggling. The program pro-

vides a format where boys interested in dance, but who dread being the only male in a class of tutu-ed girls, "can come and be macho together" while learning fundamental elements of movement art from Peter and guest artists. "No tights," he assures.

Peter teaches ballet classes for adults and teenagers and has been developing "On the Move," a community outreach program to educate people about dance through humor, drama, athleticism, and rhythm. The troupe of four dancers performs in schools, community centers, and festivals, incorporating a variety of dance elements from contemporary to *pointe* (albeit in sneakers), using music from Prokofiev to Rusty Root to impact a wide range of viewers. Peter finds that teaching expands his own movement vocabulary because he must adapt to his students' needs. "You can't hide behind technique when you teach. You have to be larger than life and motivate the students with energy and spontaneity

that exceeds even an on-stage performance," he explains.

This fall, Peter will have his hands full as well. He performs with "Air-jazz," which had a reunion concert last year, in the Boulder Ballet's *nouveau*-Nutcracker production in November. He will also continue to choreograph pieces for local dance companies, while developing the dramatic components of his own show. "The rest of the fall is up in the air," Peter laughs, which, in Peter's world, is where it should be. ♦

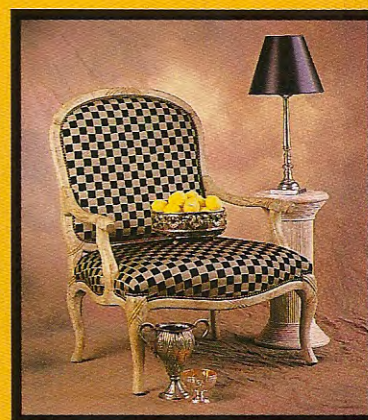
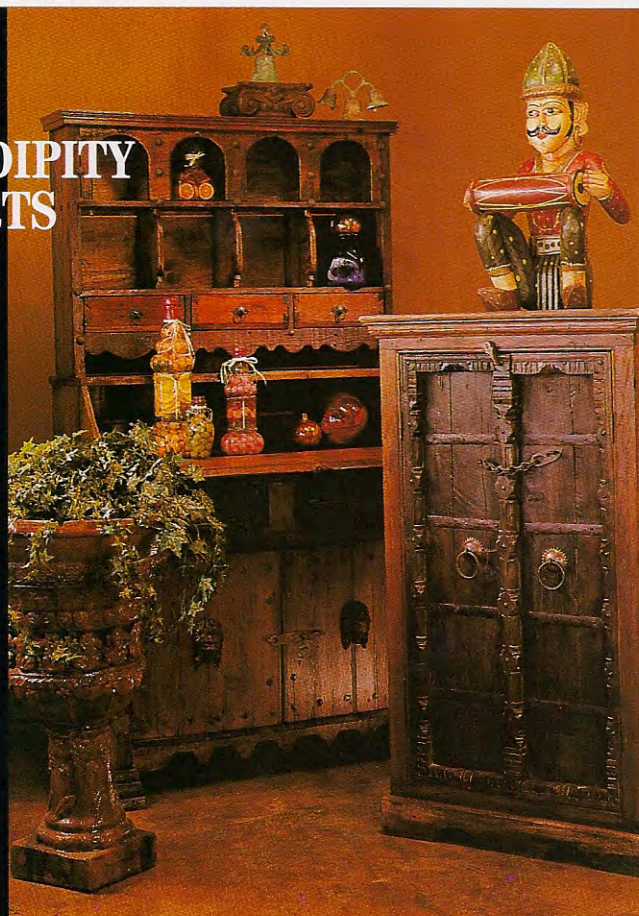
Peter Davison can be seen in the Boulder Ballet's *nouveau*-Nutcracker production on November 26, 27, 28, and 30. For complete information, including ticket prices, call the Peak Arts Association at (303) 449-1343.

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