

Career Profile: Tom Greder, physical theatre performer

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What did you want to be when you grew up?

Something different! I always rather played the Indian than the cowboy, and like most kids around me, spent much of my time exploring for doorways into fantasy. I always felt that there had to be something 'more' than the apparent, and it was uncovering this that was encouraged in me by my somewhat bohemian family

Thankfully, I had a wonderful, creative and adventurous childhood in Europe, and there never seemed a particular lack of interesting new things to go along with, positive influences or portals to peep through. And when I immigrated to Australia at age six, there was a whole new set of fantasies ready to be fueled. This was certainly no white Christmas!

Like many immigrants, we spent all our weekends really getting out there and into it. Ohhh, and the idea of being a chimney sweep did appeal for a time.

Tell us about your training and background. How did you end up here?

As a Swiss immigrant, I arrived in Australia, had a look around at this incredible flat, sparsely populated and hot country and realised the world was both round and very, very different. Since then the 'other' hemispheres have always called to me, no matter in which hemisphere I happened to be at the time. I feel I live half my life in Australia, half in Europ, and half between the two.

I made the trip cuddling a half-shaved teddy bear - thanks to my older brother who said it would be more comfortable that way in the heat.

Coming from an artistic family instilled in me an appreciation for aesthetics and a desire and rudimentary talent for creative expression, but the black sheep cloak always hung over me. I was to take an indirect route to a creative life.

I was fortunate to go to the Brisbane Independent School for many years (based on the Summerhill school philosophy of A.S. Neil), and there learnt how to learn, how to unearth my interests and toy with them. Amongst many other things, it was also there that I discovered music, circus and in particular, juggling... although dwelling little on it at the time.

It was only many years later, during the last year of my Human Movement Studies degree (the black sheep's cloak in full bloom), that juggling came back. Relishing physical activity but despairing at competition, I was fortunate, thanks to my mum, to receive tickets to a juggling troupe (The Flying Karamatzov Brothers).

Some 20 minutes into the show, the proverbial angels sang and the lights shone and for the next three hours I ran and jumped for joy. It was a moment of true inspiration, where every cell in me seemed to know the way forward. True, the way was foggy, muffled and barely perceptible, but a way none the less. And it pointed to the rest of the world. There was very little in the way of circus training in Australia at the time, apart from welcomed weekly juggling sessions at the Rock n Roll Circus. Since then, a way has always opened ahead of me....albeit at times, at the very last minute.

And so I hatched a plan to make and sell leather juggling balls (Orbit) at the markets. Something that quickly became a hit and a way for me to perform. Spending weekdays practicing and stitching earned me a trip back to Europe and

hit and a way for me to perform. Spending weekdays practicing and stitching earned me a trip back to Europe and enough to keep me going until the street shows worked for me. I also started numerous juggling clubs and meetings around the world. A year long trek through Africa and Asia and an 18 month spell living in Hong Kong consolidated my interest in circus and street theatre.

It was during this time that I decided I needed some formal training, and so I headed to London and did mornings at The Circus Space and afternoons at Ecole Philippe Gaulier. They were long and heady days indeed ! They showed me that the way forward was indeed often not where you thought it was, and that the creative life is not always a walk in the park. I also realized that throwing plastic objects around in the air had its limitations. It was time to travel within.

Since then I have taken workshops all over the world - Philippe Genty, Angela DeCastro, Daniel Stein amongst others. The combination of influences slowly merged to form my interests and style as a contextual physical comedian.

Can you describe an "average" working day for you?

There is never such a thing as an average day. Too many variables conspire. What does remain constant however, is that work and life become one. And somewhere in-between I find myself facing three open books, a suitcase of costumes, a box of toy trains (for my current show), two computer screens, a photograph that needs converting, a media release to be written, a baby boy that loves playing, a bicycle puncture to mend, a new routine to be worked, a laundry basket...either clean or not, a train to be caught, bags to be packed, and perhaps even a show idea to be jotted down.

And then there is the afternoon !

What's the first thing career related you do each day?

Wake up. Often in the middle of the night when some brilliant idea stirs me from its dream... only to be jotted down as a lame or simply incomprehensible string of words. And when I do actually get up, I check my emails. I am fortunate that my wife is also my manager and loves to take care of it all, but in amongst my 'lose weight while you eat' spams there are often little treasures to be unearthed. It is the surprises that make it all so exiting. You spend such a long time getting the ball rolling, its wonderful when it comes back.

Perhaps regrettably, the difference between a hobby and a profession is the hours of office time the latter requires. I start to suspect that the truly creative part of my work, is getting the work more so than doing it. So it seems that black sheep have their day in the end.

What's the biggest challenge you've faced in your work?

Letting go. The performing arts are unique in that they don't produce 'product'. Once a show is over, there remains just another empty theatre, circus ring or street corner. To accept the very nature of that is a great challenge for many performing artists and, indeed, the cause for many insecurities. At the same time therein lays a wonderful lesson that applies to our whole lives - you cant take it with you.

The other challenge has been to discover my true creative ambitions and to give them a just form. So many years seemed to be focused on expressing that which I was not. I guess it is everyones desire to be complete. With a certain maturity, we realise that there are many things we indeed are, but equally important, things we are not. The more I accept this, the more I find an articulate voice in my work - a voice that comes from a deeper, more honest place. A place that reveals me to myself and, in turn, shows the way forward.

In order to help other people try to access this honesty, I spend part of my year teaching 'play', creativity and communication workshops throughout the world. In them we look at the often conflicting inner voices I call 'person', 'character' and 'artist'.

Where the 'person' is interested in control, the 'character' is intrigued by chaos. It is the 'artist' that is responsible for recognizing honest impulses from the person and then allowing the character to have fun with them...rather than burying them under some superimposed impression of order and control. As performers we need to access this deeper

humanity, rise above it... and then express it.

After all, that is what the audience come to see...a place where they are perhaps reluctant to go themselves.

The other great challenge is coming back to reality after a performance or a festival. Not that I don't love to see my family or sleep in my own bed, but after being in the pure simplicity of festivals for anything up to months at a time, its hard to face day to day life. The stage is a surreal place of fantasy and illusion, reality is often much harsher and brutal. A bubble bursts.

Who are your heroes in the creative world? Who inspires, pushes your buttons?

I always adored and deeply identified with the world of Jaques Tati. Films I have watched time and time again and still find new layers and substance in. And not just his gentleness, impeccable eye for comedy and beautiful social comment, but also his tireless attention to details both in front of the camera and behind it. It's his totality in the creative process, and the sacrifices this entails, that has inspired me greatly. It is simply beautiful, articulate and consummate work that speaks the human condition and allows us to laugh with it.

Quite the opposite is the multitude of limp and uninspired rubbish that graces our TV screens daily under the pretext of comedy. The stuff that reduces us to what we too often are instead of elevating us to what we can be. The cheap laugh, the locker room joke, the stuff based on mediocrity and fear.

You work across a range of styles and realms - how do they compliment each other? Are there ever problems juggling so many hats?

In the end I am just trying to find an articulate voice for what I need to shout...and ultimately, what I need to hear. In trying to find that voice I have tried dance, music, film, theatre, circus, street theatre, cabaret, puppetry, photography, illustration...even judo. And I find traces of all of those in my work. I guess its about discovering a clear vocabulary. Some find it in a 'pure' form, I find it in a mixture. I never liked pigeon-holing myself into a particular style. That's why I was so attracted to contemporary circus...in it you can be and do anything in anyway you choose. The only time it ever gets really tricky is when I am expected to perform and teach at the same festival. They really are two different head-spaces and switching between the two is not easy.

You've toured all over the world. What's that experience been like?

Blessed! I have just completed my 20th international tour in 2007 and it feels both incredible and a milestone. With a certain maturity, I am finally able to reflect on it and actually catch up to myself and how fortuitous it has been. Is been 20 wondrous years of adventure, challenges, sacrifices, joys and despairs. Lost in an incredible world. Although performances at festivals and theatres have been wonderful, I think often about the little impromptu shows in Nepalese or Moroccan villages...and the hospitality and laughter that greeted them.

I have always been attracted to the feeling of lonesomeness. And here I differentiate that from loneliness. There is a romance in melancholy and in being lost is some far-flung corner of the world that resonates deeply in me. I think often about the early explorers - those without charts or maps. These days it is difficult to get lost, but perhaps because of that, all the more enticing.

And should I feel the need for 'home' I have my wonderful wife Olenka and beautiful boy Elmo who bring it to me, wherever we happen to be.

*What do you learn from touring that you can't learn any other way?

That the important things actually number very few...and that if your suitcase brushes against your leg, it is too big. As a performer, touring the world over also highlights the things that are the same in all of us. Not our differences, but our similarities. And to start to understand the human condition as it applies to all of us is a great leap to understanding comedy...and to being able to produce it.

Touring and traveling is also a wonderful exercise in self-reliance, independence and creativity. Things that have an essential impact on the creative process and its outcomes. Mostly though, travel opens worlds - inside and out.

Tell us a bit about your corporate animation work. This is an interesting niche!

To branch into the corporate sector came around quite organically. Teaching creativity and 'play' workshops all over the world started attracting all kinds of people, not just those in theatre and comedy.

More and more there appeared designers, engineers, architects, surgeons, even stock marketeers. Their presence and the degree to which they benefited from the experience made me realise 'why preach only to the converted'. It became apparent that in this age of absurdity where the human genome is largely cracked and the world no longer flat, more and more people were getting interested in comedy and its 'grounding' qualities. Laughter to me is visceral faith...it is one of the few moments in life when we don't question and when we live purely in the moment. It is a profound release. No surprise then, that laughter, in this day and age, is being recognised.

At the same time I had become interested in a research concept and approach to creativity called 'Synectics'. Originating in the 60s, it looked at ways to increase the problem solving abilities of industry based individuals and small teams. What it came up with was, believe it or not, 'Play'! In the creative process, it defined play as "The activity of floating and considering associations apparently irrelevant to the problem at hand".

This is something that those in the artistic world, and certainly children, have known and utilised successfully for a very long time....but that the corporate sector is only just tapping into. By combining my own teaching theories with those of the Synectics approach, I have been able to help people in all fields to break out of their patterns and boxes and discover new ways of dealing with problems...be they applied, personal or interpersonal...access a broader creative pallet and become more effective communicators.

Having the opportunity in 2002 to work for Swiss Expo and be an integral part in the training and team-building of over 3000 staff allowed me to put all this together. The resounding success made me realise that the performing and corporate worlds actually have many things in common. I guess its all a show. More significantly, I saw that the methods used in theatre can actually contributed greatly to improving work environments, conflict resolution and creative output.

The response from participants used to dry PowerPoint presentations, hours of dry monologues, and reams of hand-outs has been a huge and palpable sigh of relief. Presenters in turn have been grateful that their often in-depth knowledge finally gets to be delivered in an articulate, meaningful and interesting way...perhaps even humorously. To know something is one thing, to deliver it, is another. Effective communication rests on how information is received not how it is transmitted.

What's the best thing about your job? The worst?

That I get to travel the world, get lost in its endless wonders, make people laugh while I do it... and show my son the whole thing too. And that no matter how stressful my work may, on occasion be, it is my stress and mine alone. I am proud to have created, developed and nurtured an independent, adventurous life for me and my family. One that puts to use the opportunities that my privileged cultural and social background allows.

The worst part is having to spend periods away from my family....and the perpetual packing, re-packing and unpacking....and of course hotel buffet breakfasts. As Groucho Marx once said, "Road food is always dull and colourless, it only gets exiting a few hours later".

What's next for you?

I have just recently premièred a theatre adaptation of my show *All Aboard* at the Sue Benner theatre as part of the Metro Arts Independents series in Brisbane and funded by Arts Queensland. It has been a wonderful experience to work with director Scott Witt, designer Jonathon Oxlade, lighting designer Andrew Meadows and stage manager Rachel Butler. They have done an amazing job of harnessing my long researched idea and developing it as a full length theatre piece. They have pulled out of it the story I really needed to tell.

After performances at the Woodford Folk festival and WA Circus festival as a street show, the theatre version will tour to Europe, Brazil and Japan. I'm hoping to return to Australia in late 2008 and complete a tour here.

The show has also generated huge interest in the puppetry circles, and I am excited about making more in-roads into the realm of puppetry and object manipulation festivals throughout the world.

Directing and teaching is also growing hugely for me, and I look forward to putting my eye to more people in their own expressive endeavors. With my wife, we are looking at ways of taking more Australian artists to Europe, providing them with a supportive infrastructure and training there so they can broaden themselves and their work. We're also collaborating with people such as Andrew Cory from Redspoon in Brisbane to provide local workshops and direction to develop shows suitable for international touring. Likewise, we wish to bring more foreign artists to Australia and offer the same in reverse. For all of the protective measures in place to 'protect' the local industry, we believe strongly that inspiring the arts is supporting the arts.

I also have several other show ideas in progress, including working with legendary contemporary clown and director Jango Edwards in Barcelona on a totally interactive show. We have already started on it, but in amongst the touring, directing and teaching, finding time is proving difficult - a wonderful problem indeed!

And then there are the three open books to be read.

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