Written by Jeff Ignatius
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I ask Carter Brown where he wants to take his Lazer Vaudeville troupe. “Australia,” he says. I clarify the question: artistically. He thinks for a moment and says that he and his two collaborators have been working on a piece that is as much about percussion as it is juggling, “actually creating music” with the objects being juggled and a sound processor.

Later, when I’m talking to Lazer Vaudeville member Jeffrey Daymont, Brown breaks in holding a translucent pink coat hangar. “You know what I’d like at the next level?” he asks. “Color-coordinated pink hangars!”

I think this response negates the previous one. What I failed to understand – even though I’d seen it with my own eyes – was that Lazer Vaudeville isn’t about artistic statements but entertainment, pure and simple. And Brown and Daymont and Cindy Marvell have a passion for juggling and putting smiles on people’s faces.

Over the past few weeks, a lot of people – mostly schoolchildren – have gotten plenty of grins from this Florida-based trio. Lazer Vaudeville has been touring local schools as part of a two-week residency in the Quad City Arts Visiting Artists program. The group finishes its stay with a juggling workshop on Friday and its full formal concert on Saturday at the Adler Theatre.

If you get a chance to see Lazer Vaudeville before these three skip town, you’ll witness some real joy, from the performers and their audience.

We live in an age when many simply pleasurable things have been given a hip (and often cynical) sheen. Tap gets grungy with Stomp and Tap Dogs; Kronos Quartet shuns conventional classical music for experimental, conceptual works; Penn & Teller rob magic of its wonder with gore.

Lazer Vaudeville does a bit of that, too, with a laser-light show, a wizard and dragon, and fluorescent acts bathed in black light. But it’s fundamentally pure: juggling in a variety-show format.

The three members of Lazer Vaudeville – which Brown formed in 1987 – have nearly 60 years of juggling experience among them. They’ve turned it into a profession, doing about 150 shows a year, but it’s much more than that. Brown learned to juggle 21 years ago, he said, and “I got addicted.”

And you’d have to be pretty cold to remain uninfected by the hard-won bliss of a Lazer Vaudeville performance.

On Monday, in a crowded gymnasium at the Handicapped Development Center in Davenport, Lazer Vaudeville previewed its program before an appreciative audience. Daymont worked three cigar boxes, juggling them, tossing them behind his back and under a leg, twirling them about in such a way that they looked glued together when they clearly were not. And then he upped the ante by doing an act with 10 boxes, including arranging them with amazing dexterity and balancing them on his chin.

Brown and Marvell juggled six clubs together, throwing the fluorescent yellow/green-and-fuchsia bowling pins to themselves and to each other, standing a considerable distance apart. Once they get in a certain groove, I stopped watching the performers and just stared at the colors flying through the gym. The clubs twirled poetically as if on dozens of strings, suspended in the air.

And that's only the beginning. Daymont joined the act, playing the clown, dodging clubs in mock horror, snatching them from their intended destinations while sneaking in front of and behind his partners, helping to create the most graceful slapstick routine you're ever likely to see.

The act builds and the stunts become trickier and trickier, and my amazement grew largely from the intense concentration it must take just to keep the show going.

In another piece, the three players bounce balls off drums, essentially juggling the spheres without their hands, while frequently exchanging drums through the air, catching them in stride in time to meet the balls on their way down. This act has none of the manic energy of the clubs; it's juggling elevated to the level of tribal ritual.

Juggling itself is an ancient art, and the members of Lazer Vaudeville don't pretend they're revolutionizing it. But what separates the troupe from your standard jugglers is that they employ juggling in new ways. "What really makes a difference is how you put it together," Brown said.

The drums-and-balls routine, Marvell said, is "fairly original." Framing juggling in a new way, she said, "is one of the exciting parts in a creative way."

Daymont worked as a solo juggler for 12 years before joining Lazer Vaudeville two years ago. He was attracted by the "quality of the show," and that it incorporated all-original music. Being in the group allowed him to fine-tune his cigar-box routine, but it also gives "more comedy opportunity. We can kind of banter back and forth."

Juggling is only part of the point, though. With television and video games, Lazer Vaudeville's members argue, people have forgotten what live theatre is all about. The troupe has given plenty of children a taste of the experience at school. And on Saturday, "they will drag their parents back to the theatre."

Lazer Vaudeville will hold a public juggling workshop on Friday, October 13, at 7 p.m. at the Quad City ArtsCenter. The troupe's formal concert will be held Saturday, October 14, at 7 p.m. at the Adler Theatre.