

## *Shockingly Scientific:*

# Thom Britton's Journey Into Reality Theater



Andy Matarrese  
Thom Britton profile

Thom Britton likes the Renaissance Man idea.

Britton, 40, co-owns a production company, does some catering work and goes to culinary school.

And, he occasionally does some performing, as in swallowing swords, eating fire and a number of other sideshow tricks ranging from chainsaw juggling to walking on broken glass.

"It's the Velvet Underground of vaudeville," he explained. To him, his audience is other performers – comedy writers, stand-up comics, improv people – people like him, he said.

"He's lived about 10 lifetimes," said Samuel Sion, who performed with Britton in one of Britton's shows, "Professor Tom's World of Wonders."

Sion, 21, played Britton's "electric man," where in a recreation of Nikola Tesla's demonstrations of alternating current, Britton would send 100,000 volts of electricity through Sion and use him to turn on light bulbs.

For Britton, the show – along with an earlier show, "The Flying Cat Circus" – was part of an ongoing attempt in his work to bring some real showmanship and artistry to the world of sideshow, to "take it out of the street, and the sideshow, and the carnival and the rock how and put it in the Steppenwolf."

"They're not lowbrow," Kristin Lopez, his wife, said.

The two actually met when Britton was performing on the street in Five Points in Birmingham, Ala., where he was juggling fire.

"I was definitely skipping class," she said, and she thought he was interesting.

Juggling, actually, was how Britton got into performing in the first place. When he was 6 years old, back home in Metairie, La., near New Orleans, his father noticed his talent and took him to a back-room meeting of jugglers at Chuck E. Cheese's to hone his skills. Before long, Britton was juggling knives, then fire. At 16, he tried his hand at bringing his act to the street.

"It took a long time to figure out how to suck them in, how to make them care" he said, recalling the crushing failures of his first attempts.

At the same age, he started working summers at a circus – Hall and Christ World of Wonders – where he had great success as a talker, the guy beckoning circus-goers to see what's in the next tent. He did so well, raking in three or four times the ticket sales of an average talker, the people running the circus agreed to teach him some tricks – how to eat fire and swallow

swords, among other things, and even put him on stage during slow times – just to keep him happy.

At 19, he left to try his own hand at performing, and a little under two years ago, he thought of his most ambitious project: start up a dinner theater in the Chicago area.

“It’s an old idea in need of revival,” he said.

When Britton brings up the idea of a dinner theatre to people under 30, he said they look at him like he made it up himself.

“It’s what grandparents did,” he said. “Back in the day, it’s where you’d take your date. You’d go to the diner theatre, watch the show, have a meal.”

It’s a tested concept, and he said that makes it all the more viable, and laments that it was killed by low-quality joints. He said he thinks he can bring the idea of dinner theater back and make it work, what with his background in restaurants, cooking and performing.

Restaurant work and performing have overlapped almost his entire life, he said. Britton comes from a long line of men who cook, and he bought his first restaurant – a burger joint in Center Point, Ala. – at 23, and flipped it after nine months.

When he thought of the dinner theater idea, he said he recalled thinking, “Well, I should probably *really* learn to cook,” and enrolled in the Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Chicago.

“I want to be able to do any one position when anyone calls in sick,” he said.

He hopes that, on his own, he’ll be able to pull the trigger on the project within three to four years, but it’s not out of the question that an investor who wants his name on the theater could come by before.

“What I do know I want to do is keep a little bit of that ‘underground,’” he said of his possible line-up. “I want to keep an element of doing very risqué, very progressive theater.”

Lopez, 33, an accountant for a restaurant in Chicago, figured she could help with the theater’s finances, and let Britton handle what’s out front.

“I think that we definitely are a really good partnership in that my strengths are his weaknesses and my weaknesses are his strengths,” she said.

Despite his efforts, Britton hasn’t been able to convince Lopez to go on stage.

“Thom really does all the talking,” she said.

Britton’s next performance, his fire-eating act, will be April 1 at the Lincoln Lodge.