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He'll eat fire, walk on glass, absorb a million volts for your amusement

BY MIKE THOMAS Staff Reporter/mthomas@suntimes.com February 27, 2013 11:56PM



Thom Britton eating fire, during his one man "Freak Show and Tell" performance, at the No Exit Theater on Friday, January 25, 2012, in Chicago. | Chandler West-For Sun-Times Media

When sideshow legend Melvin Burkhart, whom Robert Ripley dubbed the “Human Blockhead,” died in 2001, the New York Times published a story in which an associate of Burkhart’s told the paper, “Anybody can insert objects up their nasal passage, but Melvin’s patter and comedy made it an act.”

The same could be said of Chicago resident and Burkhart protégé Thom Britton.

“I feel like Thom can do the acts, but his biggest talent is his mouth,” says Michael Saab, with whom Britton performed for several years as part of the Modern Gypsies circus/sideshow duo. Britton followed that up with a college-touring venture called Flying Cat circus.

“He can pull an audience in and wrap them into whatever web he wants and bring them on a little journey. ... I would put Thom up there with the greats, for sure.”

The 40-year-old Britton, a New Orleans transplant and inventor of a traveling one-man extravaganza called “FreakShow & Tell,” learned his tricks from masters of the trades and has for decades been tapping himself like a maple tree.

“When you first start learning it, you’ve got to stretch [the nasal passage] a little bit,” the fast-talking Britton says of hammering a nail (always disinfected with an alcohol wipe beforehand) several inches into his nostril. Earlier he had ended a three-day run at the intimate No Exit Café

(part of a January series presented by Theo Ubuque Cabaret Theatre) in Rogers Park, where he also lives. His accountant wife of 16 years, Christine, served as his assistant.

“[The nasal passage is] not quite the size of a nail,” he continues. “And you sneeze a lot. Your eyes water, because anything in the nose really overreacts and you’re stretching something inside. [But] you just keep going and it stops.”

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At this point, Britton feels “nothing.” Even more surprising is his claim that he has never been seriously injured since getting the sideshow bug at age 16. Not from dancing on and resting his weight-bearing skull atop thousands of razor-sharp glass shards. Not from eating fire off long screws wrapped in white gas-soaked Kevlar as if it were yummy toasted marshmallows.

Not even by allowing up to a million volts of electricity, courtesy of a homemade contraption rigged with two Tesla coils, to course through his body.

He did all of that and more during his Rogers Park run, making the handful of rapt audience members visibly and audibly squeamish while wryly delivering how-to explanations of each stunt. “I want to teach you how to eat fire so you can eat fire,” he said as part of his big opener.

He then went on to ignite a torch, “chew” the flames, loudly savor their flavor and announce dryly, “You may want to practice this at home.”

One bit of advice: don’t. Even cautious pros — such as the fire-breathing performer at Lyric Opera who recently sustained burns to his neck and face during a rehearsal mishap — get hurt. Britton, though, says it’s rare and that he himself has never been injured beyond a mildly painful singe.

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Growing up in Birmingham, Ala., the oldest of seven kids, Britton was first entranced by magic before segueing to sideshows. He’s also done some stand-up comedy and has an applied sciences degree from Chicago’s Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts. His next public performance is scheduled for 8 p.m. March 9 at Space Club HQ, 3925 N. Elston. (Reservations: www.freakshowtell.eventbrite.com.)

As the preserver of a dying art form, to which “FreakShow” is a “love letter,” Britton is striving to open a variety arts theater of his own somewhere in town — a place that would serve as both an exhibition hall for established talent and an incubator of up-and-comers who need somewhere to “suck” before storming Vegas.

“FreakShow,” he says, “is what actors call ‘the important work.’ It’s my Russian play, my German play that nobody wants to come see but that actors need to do. It’s the vegetables. As an artist, you can’t just do the meat and the dessert.”