

Finding Space on the Streets

# WOMEN STREET PERFORMERS

BY FELICE LING

For me, it was on the University of Memphis campus, right after the lunch rush for the day. It was the end of January 2011. Students loitering between classes stopped to watch: One hour, two shows, and two hats later, my cell phone died. I headed home early because I was afraid to be out and alone in the city by myself without a working phone.

For magician Billy Kidd, it was in her hometown in Canada, sometime in 2006. At 11 at night, she stood in a spot that was too

narrow for a full show and performed for locals—locals, she says, who were also drunk. Soon after that, she says, “I was taught not to perform for drunk people, and I’ve never done it since.”

Living statue and contact juggler Dawn Monette (long before she developed her living statue character, Goldie) dressed herself up all in green. She went to English Bay in Vancouver, juggled on the side of the path for three hours back in 2005, and made 10 bucks. “There were a few people who thought I was pretty cool,”



Left and Above: Billy Kidd

stories in various forms from different sources. This time, though, all of these buskers share one thing in common that few other buskers share: We are all women.

#### JUST HOW SAFE IS IT?

According to Kirsten Anderberg, author of *The Busker Book: 30 Years as a Solo Woman Performer*, there is one female career busker for every nine males. In magic, that gap is surely even wider. Why are there so few female solo performers out on the streets?

There are plenty of female performers in general. Dancers, singers, and actors ... women in these various art forms work side by side with their male counterparts. In magic, the disparity of male to female magicians is troublesome. In street performance, the disparity is worse.

I have been interested in magic since I was a little girl, thanks to the gift of a magic kit after my older brother taught me how to pull off my thumb. From there, after

practicing the French Drop for years with three plastic quarters and holding little shows for my thankfully supportive family (who, by the way, got quite tired of watching a seven-year-old make a fake quarter disappear), it turned on an occasional interest to a full-fledged hobby in high school. Performances for my family transformed into performances for my classmates and, in college, a way for me to earn some extra money as well as a means through which I could contribute to the community. I wasn't afraid to perform, and yet ... there was always something holding me back from taking my act out to the rough-and-tumble world of street theater.

Why? As the youngest and the most novice of the performers described here, my insecurities and fears were clear. My first excuse? Safety.

Simply put, I was afraid.

I first performed in Memphis, Tennessee. Despite a lack of pedestrian traffic in the city (which is usually the case, except for holidays and festivals), audiences were friendly and receptive. There are plenty of musicians and a few times, I was able to perform near the Beale Street Flippers. That said, when I first started, I was the only circle show out there. I felt dangerously alone.

Once my inner-alarm system was set off when a stranger sat on a bench opposite my pitch and stayed there all through my show.

she recalls with a laugh, “And there were a couple people who felt I should get a job.”

And Kiwi Louise Kerr (aka Sport Suzie) donned a red nose along with a “dark, black punky costume” when she headed out to Cathedral Square in Christchurch, New Zealand. She put on some *Lemon Tree* and “probably some Eminem, God forbid,” then proceeded to juggle knives. “[I] did some pretty terrible juggling, probably made a balloon for a kid I got to help, then tried to con some poor guy into holding my unicycle while I, this strange-looking clown, climbed all over him to get to the top” where she proceeded to stick a bucket onto her head and get him to throw a ball in. “Then [I] jumped down and awkwardly held out my hat without uttering a word. It was fun, scary, and to be honest, I was happy it was over. I think I made \$13.”

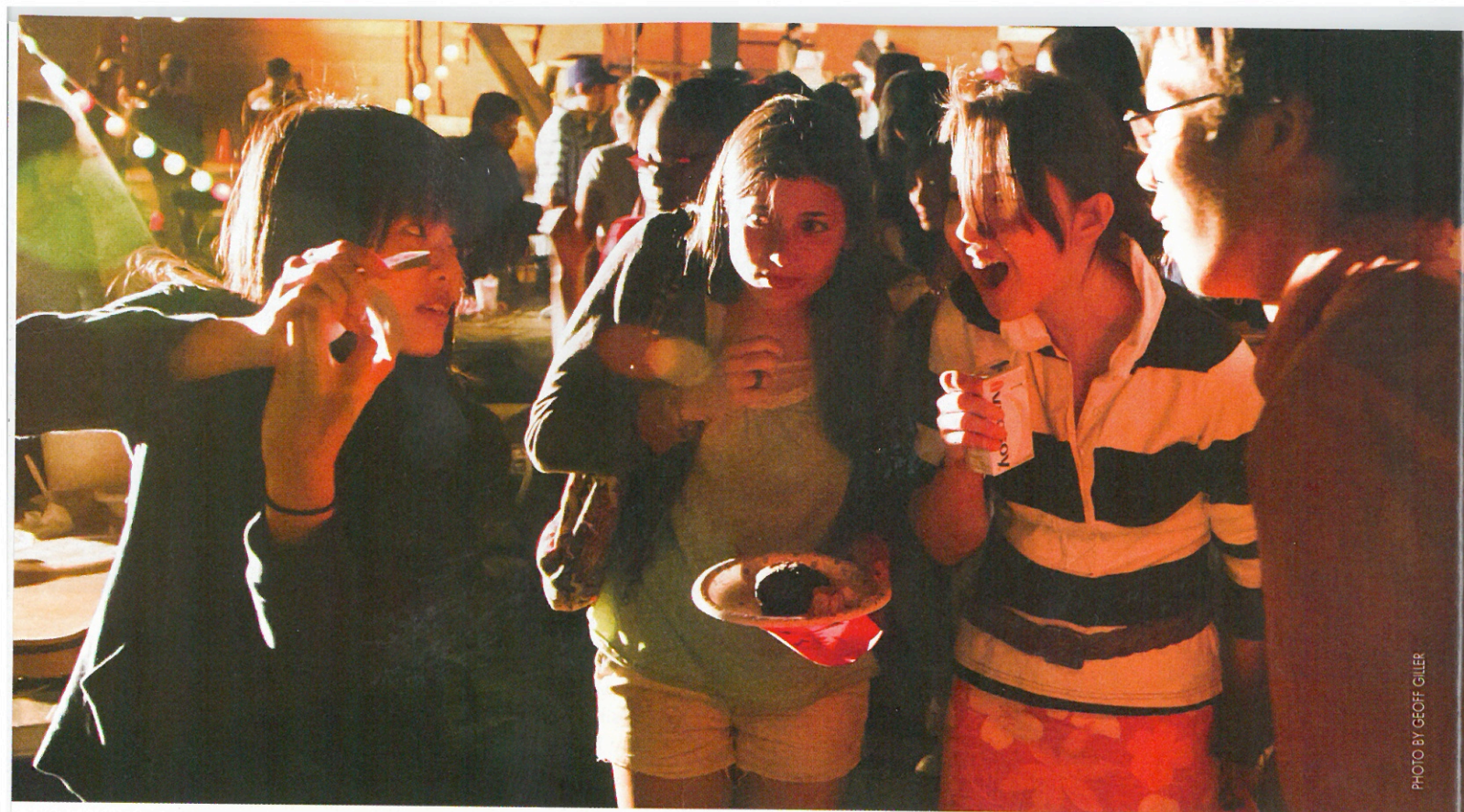
Louise Clarke (whose street performing character Pandora Pink juggles cigar boxes, manipulates a hat, and cracks her audiences up) was a veteran performer when she started her street show. Even then, she says bluntly, “When I started my solo show, it was really terrifying. You’ll be the only person there—nobody else to rely on or fall back on. Obviously, it’s confrontational. They don’t have to watch you if they don’t want to. They just walk away.”

As magicians, we have all heard these “first-time-out-busking”



PHOTO BY PIERRE D

Left: Dawn Monette in character as “Goldie”



Author Felice Ling performing in a night market

PHOTO BY GEOFF GILLER

When I packed up to leave before the sun set, he started following me from across the street. I stopped at the corner to chat with a vendor until he was gone.

This was the only time that I ever felt unsafe while performing. Soon after, I stopped randomly choosing spots in the city and started working more at local fairs and festivals that I found with the help of another Memphis magician. Still, this event stands out starkly in my busking memory.

Thus, imagine my surprise when I asked other performers if they ever felt unsafe while street performing. When I asked Pandora Pink, she at first said tentatively—then later, firmly, “No ... ? No. No. Maybe a little bit, but that’s because there were some drunk men around. But then, they weren’t going to punch me out or anything. I don’t think I’m going to be physically abused.” She went on, “I just don’t want anybody to push me off or anything like that. So I don’t think I’ve ever felt particularly unsafe, but of course there’s situations where I had to monitor drunk people.”

So I decided to ask Billy Kidd, who actually was pushed off her platform at a street show festival in Edinburgh, Scotland; a man with a beer in his hands walked up behind her, gave her a shove, and walked off. Billy Kidd spun around, played it off with a joke, and pushed forward with her show.

“That was the first time that *that* happened to me. I’m trying to think of something similar.” After a pause, I could almost hear her shaking her head on the other side of the phone. “I would say

no, nothing like that has ever happened.” Mainly, she notes, the trick is to stay away from drunk people. Never perform for them, and you’ll be okay.

Only contact juggler Dawn Monette, under the guise of her living statue persona Goldie, has had to face down heckling that verged on the edge of physical abuse. Passersby, in an attempt to get her to break character and move, have touched and pushed her. Monette explains how she had one woman “come up and grind her butt into me to try and get a reaction.” She also talked about how some spectators would pretend to punch her—only to stop an inch or so away from her face—just to get a rise out of her. The worst night for her was just prior to the 2011 Stanley Cup riot in Vancouver. While most spectators were great, she says, a couple rowdy onlookers attempted to blow vuvuzelas (a kind of horn) directly into her ear. As a result of this incident, Monette is partially deaf in her right ear. “The following 10 people who did that got a ball stuffed into the base of their horn.” The next night—the actual night of the riot—she stayed home.

## PERFORMER PROFILES

### Billy Kidd

Real Name: Gia Anne-Marie Felicitas  
From: Alberta, Canada  
Her Act: Magician, Street Performer, Entertainer

### Pandora Pink

Real Name: Louise Clarke  
From: Gloucester, U.K.  
Her Act: Juggles cigar boxes and does hat manipulations, all to the theme of 1950s rock and roll

### Goldie

Business Name: Dawn Dreams Circus  
Real Name: Dawn Monette  
From: Montreal, Canada  
Her Act: A human statue covered all in gold, who contact juggles when someone puts money into her hat

### Sport Suzie

Real Name: Louise Kerr  
From: New Zealand  
Her Act: Striving to be the next Jane Fonda, the routine involves a strange work-out routine that includes juggling, unicycles, balloons, and a Diablo.



Felice Ling preparing for an escape

PHOTO BY KIMBERLY HILL

## HECKLERS

Performers get heckled. In the honest, seemingly free-for-all venue of street theater, facing down hecklers goes with the job. For me, heckling has never been a big problem—maybe partially because people generally don’t feel threatened by me, and because I haven’t performed on the streets long enough. When

it does happen, I ignore it, and the rest of the audience usually tells the heckler to shut up, enjoy the show, or shove off.

Sport Suzie (a character, she notes, that is not “stereotypically female”) agrees that heckling isn’t a big problem for her. “Sometimes there might be the odd sexual reference but very rarely, and I find if the audience is on your side they will shut them down before you have to do anything.” She goes on to explain, “It’s odd for me to get a heckler because I’m a woman. I do more types of things that a typical male performer would do, so maybe that’s why, or it could just be that my big biceps scare hecklers away.”

Pandora Pink’s character is also one that is “high-status ... not low status.” She has hecklers, but they rarely create big problems for her. “I think I probably get heckled less maybe ... [as] a female street performer.” In addition to that, she points out, “Some men find me a bit intimidating, so I don’t get too many problems. And I don’t get any problems because I’m a woman.”

Dawn Monette’s Goldie does get heckled, but the kind of heckling she faces is less verbal than the kind that the other performers get at circle shows. “Particularly as a statue, you can become pretty vulnerable because you’re supposed to stay still.” She describes her kind of heckling as “more playful. They try to get into a staring contest, or they try to scare me so I’ll react, or make me laugh and make me move because they want to break the illusion of the statue. And I find that playful. Otherwise,” she says, “you get people heckling you. ‘Get a job’ or ‘She’s not that still!’ or ‘Oh my God, she’s blinking.’ Or people just generally putting you down. But for the most part, I get more positive responses and more happy people and most of the time the peo-

Pandora Pink



## SAFETY TIPS

ple who don't like you will ignore you." Billy Kidd sums up her experiences with hecklers nicely: "Oh yeah. There are hecklers out there. Not always, but there are. They come and go. If the whole audience can hear them, I respond to them. I just handle them so that they know I have control, and there's nothing they can do about it."

### A MALE-DOMINATED WORLD

The stories of female street performers facing down hecklers sound, more or less, the same to me as the stories that I have heard from other male magicians in the busking world. The difference lies not so much in what Pandora Pink calls "the odd idiot," but in the audience as a whole.

Billy Kidd states that female street performers probably all agree on one thing: "We all know how much we have to compete in a very male-dominated industry."

"If a woman's performing, you kinda' have to win everybody over. I mean, you win over the women quite easily. But the men, they'll be a bit like, 'Oh, that's pretty nice,' but you know, they don't necessarily take it that seriously. You have to be really, in a way, better." Pandora Pink says that women have to be stronger in their performances. Sport Suzie, however, only partially agrees. She's gotten "maybe a little bit of 'Is she gonna be good?' from the audience," but, she says she believes "that's not because I'm a woman but because I have lacked belief in myself or show in those situations."

Goldie does note that some street acts require a more aggressive approach—which is a problem, especially when "our society doesn't always accept aggressive female characters."

It is hard and confrontational out on the street. Performers have to be confident. "You have to really grab everybody's attention, and you got to be funny and quick, witty, and clever, and skillful, and—and, you know, some women just think, 'Oh, I can't be bothered to do that,'" suggests Pandora Pink. "They're not interested in being so overtly aggressive, maybe, on that level. So it's quite challenging, you know."

What does this acceptance

**DAWN MONETTE WARNS** all street performers to be aware. Be cautious of your online presence, she says as she remembers a time when she had to deal with a stalker. Sport Suzie gives some handy advice: "As long as you are confident and self assured you'll be able to handle anything. Maybe have a phone handy and a simple and quick way to pack [your] gear down, so if there are some odd balls hanging around, you can get off the pitch and away quickly and don't have to deal with them." This advice, she notes, would be advice that she would give to any performer—man or woman.

actually mean, when it comes down to the street show? Kidd says, "I think because there are not a lot of females in street performing in general—you know, whether it's magic or juggling—I think, and this is just my theory, that when people walk by a female street performer, I think they'd rather go watch a guy do it. In fact, I kind of feel that way when I see a street performer. And I think that's just society and culturally how we've been brought up. So there is that struggle. I do have to convince people that I'm good enough to watch. And it's actually only when I tell people that, oh yeah, there's not a lot of female street performers or magicians that the lay public realize that. But I don't think that's the first thing that's on their mind. I think for artists, though—'Oh yeah! There's not a lot of female magicians, or there's not a lot of female magician street performers.' I

think for laypeople, I don't think they think like that."

Pandora Pink points out that male street performers always earn more money than their female counterparts. She knows this because, she says, while she definitely has done better than some boys, "when it comes to the big mega shows, the big really successful street performances, the people who are earning the most money would be the boys." She uses the example of her partner: "I don't earn the same amount of money as Nigel, my partner. I never have, and probably never will."

### GETTING AWAY WITH SOME JOKES

Some things, though, female street performers can do that the guys cannot. These advantages amount to jokes that women can get away with—jokes that men would get into trouble for attempting.

Pandora Pink says these jokes are a result of "how women have been sexualized more than men. We're sexualized by men, so you can sexualize something a lot more and get away with it, whereas a man wouldn't necessarily be able to." I was a little confused with this statement; there are plenty of male street performers who make blatantly lewd jokes—jokes, of course, that work well on the street. But she explains, "That's how a lot of women climb all over the men, you know. Shove their fanny in



PHOTO BY PAUL FLOCCO

Dawn Dreams

## WHAT TO WEAR

**FOR MAGICIANS**, Billy Kidd recommends that you should "choose what you normally feel comfortable wearing. And if you need certain items or, you know, pockets and whatnot, then adjust accordingly. But just wear what you are comfortable with. If you like performing in a dress or a skirt, that's fine. If you like performing in jeans, if you like performing in a suit—whatever it may be—that's okay too. That depends on your personal character."

their face, and ... There's a lot of physical contact. Whereas I don't think a man would be able to ... do that with a woman, for instance."

### THE REWARDS OF THE STREETS

"Magic is terrifying I think, initially when you're learning it and you perform. And on the street, yeah, it's very vulnerable on the street, which is what I like about it. It's very challenging."

It's the challenge and the thrill of the show, and the freedom of it, that makes it all worthwhile for magician Billy Kidd. Street performers value their freedom, and women street performers value it so much that they still go out there and do it, despite the fact that their peers are few, and that they know they have to hold their own—be as good as, or even much better than, the guys out there—in a male-dominated industry. "I love what I do! If you don't like what you do as a profession, whether it be performing or an office job, then get out of it! Why do something you don't like? I have never understood people who hate their jobs or who wait for retirement to enjoy their life. I would never want to retire."

I've never had another job besides being a performer and I will keep it that way."

Sport Suzie values the street for its freedom as well. "It was a challenging place to try new material, push yourself, and have the opportunity to experience creating a show from nothing." Besides, she points out, "It was also a place to make money when I didn't have a gig, so I could work regardless of bookings."

All of these performers—strong, confident women (you have to be, to brave the streets)—have a clear passion for their art. This passion comes out, especially, for Billy Kidd when she talks about her identity—not just as a female street performer, but, simply, as a street performer. "There's this stigma about street performing anyway, with the fact

that a lot of people have a concept that [street performers] are like beggars. But I think the professional ones know who we are, and we are not beggars. We're entertaining people."

And for those who are thinking about taking their act out onto the streets, all of these performers have one thing to say: Just do it! •



Sport Suzie