

Sidedoor Season 2 Ep. 7 The Man Who Defied Gravity Final Transcription

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Tony Cohn: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian, with support from PRX. I'm Tony Cohn.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: One of the most famous people in the world died on July 14, 1918. The first world war was raging, but still, newspapers around the world found space on their front page to pause and acknowledge a man who wasn't a military leader, or a politician, or a Nobel prize winner or a war hero. Nope. Paul Cinquevalli was an entertainer, a juggler, but a bit of a strong man and an acrobat as well. In a time before large scale air travel, Cinquevalli was a global celebrity, amazing audiences from England all the way to New Zealand.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: He was the subject of countless newspaper stories, all praising his mastery over everyday objects: pool balls, wine glasses, plates, bath tubs, and many others, stunned at his apparent ability to pause the rules of Earth's physics.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: In 1910, the New York Tribune pointed out, "Had Cinquevalli lived in the Middle Ages, he would have been burned at the stake as a sorcerer. Even today, some people say he is aided by the devil."

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: This is a guy who was regularly called, "The Greatest Juggler in the world." But in the years following his death, he was just forgotten. How does that happen? I certainly hadn't heard of him, and while reporting this story, I can honestly say that my mind has been blown learning about some of the things he did. So, on this episode of Sidedoor, we look at that forgotten story of Paul Cinquevalli, one of the world's biggest stars, not even a century ago, and we find his legacy in the 21st Century, in the small, but thriving American circus scene. We'll be back after a quick break.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Paul Cinquevalli wasn't always a mustachio-ed, leotard-wearing circus star. In 1859, he was born, Emil Otto Paul Braun in Lezno, Prussia, which is now Poland. There's a story told that as a school child, he used to show off to his friends on his way to and from class.

Erik Aberg: He says that the first trick that he invented was on his way to school. He threw up his slate and a chalk, and he would catch the chalk, while the slate was still in the air and with three strokes, he would draw the letter A on the slate, before he would catch it.

Tony Cohn: Do you think that's true?

Erik Aberg: Uh, no. I don't think it's true, but it's a nice story. (Laughs).

Tony Cohn: (Laughs).

Tony Cohn: This is Erik Aberg. He's one of the juggling world's leading historians and you might not be surprised to learn, Aberg is a juggler himself. So, at the age of 11, young Emil Braun's life changed forever. He finished first place in a school gymnastics tournament in Berlin; and afterwards, he and his parents were approached by a mysterious man. The mysterious stranger invited the Braun family to an acrobatic performance that night and the Brauns said, "sure, why not?" Here's how Cinquevalli explained the evening to the San Francisco Call, in his own words, in 1902.

[MUSIC]

Paul Cinquevalli: While we were seated at a table, watching the various features, the stranger suddenly excused himself. He appeared a few moments later upon the stage, attired in regulation tights and went through the most remarkable aerial performance I had ever seen. Soon he returned to us, and without much ado, proposed to take me under his tutelage, assuring my parents that I would astonish the world before I was out of my teens. My father, who wished me to enter the priesthood, was righteously horrified. He bade the distinguished stranger a cold, "good night" and hurried me out of the presence of such temptation. I did not sleep that night, and soon found myself back in the hypnotic influence of my tempter. At last, no longer able to resist, I allowed myself to be virtually abducted, and was taken across the Russian frontier to far Odessa.

Tony Cohn: So, Cinquevalli literally ran away with the circus to become a trapeze star. It seems unnecessary to point this out, but that's kinda what I do. The trapeze is a dangerous game. Back in Cinquevalli's day, they didn't perform with nets to catch them if they fell, and performers did fall. There's an article in the New York Tribune from 1910 that tells this story.

New York Tribune Article from 1910: "Once, in Odessa, while walking the slack wire over the heads of the spectators, the heavy snow on the roof of the tent suddenly broke through like an avalanche, toppling Paul off the wire into a woman's lap, killing her and injuring him."

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: So, a dead audience member didn't stop the young Cinquevalli, who was nicknamed, "the little flying devil" by amazed Russian audiences, but he fell again.

Erik Aberg: Sometime in the 1870s, he performed at the Zoological Gardens in St. Petersburg. And there, he fell from the flying trapeze and broke his entire body basically and was in a coma for a long time. So, when he woke up, he couldn't be an acrobat anymore. So, that's when he switched to juggling and he had this juggling premiere also in St. Petersburg in 1876 at the Zoological Gardens.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: After his trapeze accident, the newspaper trail goes a bit thin. We know it took Cinquevalli months to heal and rehab from his injuries. We also know that he always juggled for fun. He spoke pretty candidly about being a prodigious practicer. He told a newspaper reporter that he practiced for hours each day, until he could do his throws and catches in complete

darkness. A lot of his act included things we wouldn't typically think of as, "juggling." Many of his most famous tricks combine feats of strength, with manipulating objects in amazing ways. In the late 1800s, the word, "equilibrist" was used as something of a catch-all for physical vaudeville performers. He once, and I quote, "lifted and balanced in midair a man almost as large as President Taft on a chair, with his teeth." End quote. Taft's weight was up and down throughout his life, but it typically was in the ballpark of 300 pounds. Cinquevalli performed this trick throughout his career, but presumably he had trimmer assistants.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Cinquevalli was also said to juggle two plates in one hand, spin a bucket in the air on top of a cane with the other hand, while using a candle, which was balanced on his forehead, to light and smoke a cigarette. After a few years of mastering tricks and interacting with audiences from smaller stages around Russia and in Paris, Cinquevalli found his way to London. The heart of an Empire. The world's biggest stage. And in 1885, he reappeared in the newspaper record.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: It's hard to know exactly what an audience might have seen at a Cinquevalli performance from this time, but we do know that he was a meticulous practicer, who created tricks in his imagination, right on the edge of what seemed possible. They aren't really tricks as much as they're feats of mind over matter, and he took years to perfect them. Here's a description of that process in an article from *The Strand Magazine* describing Cinquevalli's most celebrated trick. It took him eight years to perfect this one.

[MUSIC]

[TYPEWRITER TYPING SFX]

Article from *The Strand Magazine*: A glass is held in his mouth. In the glass is a billiard ball, on which is balanced an ordinary pool cue. On top of the cue are balanced two other billiard balls, one on top of the other. After 18 months' weary practice, he could maintain the lot in position for one, two, or three seconds.

[MUSIC]

[TYPEWRITER TYPING SFX]

Tony Cohn: That sounds impossible.

Erik Aberg: Yeah. That is impossible and many people said that this is impossible. And he even had scientists write him letters saying that what you're doing is impossible. So, there was all of this talk about his tricks, if they were real or not.

Tony Cohn: What do you think?

Erik Aberg: Well, I'll tell you one little story and that is, he was once performing at the Empire Theater in London and in the middle of the performance, the Prince of Wales, who had been hiding up in his balcony, stands up and says, "Stop the performance! I'm going to inspect the props." So, his guards come up on stage and everything freezes, so Cinquevalli, he can't do

anything. And the prince walks up on the stage and starts going through the props to see if there is flattened balls or there had been different suggestions to how he faked this billiard balance. If the walls were, you know, half filled with lead, if they were flattened, if there was a little spike or something that would make this possible. So, the Prince goes through all of Cinquevalli's props and he doesn't find anything. So, Cinquevalli he could (Laughs) continue the performance and the people could continue their guessing.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: And an audience's inability to believe their eyes when they see an amazing trick isn't a thing that's unique to Cinquevalli's time.

Thom Wall: Yeah, that's true. There was like, I think, a 5-year-old girl that accused me of using magnets today.

Tony Cohn: That's Thom Wall, a professional juggler, who follows in Cinquevalli's footsteps of juggling everyday objects; things you'd find around your house. He also performs with the Cirque du Soleil.

Thom Wall: Uh, you know, at the beginning, I was more of a mainstream juggler. You know, I would juggle balls, and clubs, and rings, and sort of the standard props and my interest sort of shifting a few years ago. There are more historical props that aren't used so much anymore, you know, like wine glasses and knives and plates.

Tony Cohn: This is an area of juggling that Cinquevalli really pioneered.

Thom Wall: There's a field of juggling they call gentlemen juggling or salon juggling because they're objects that a gentleman might find in a salon (Laughs), you know, sitting room.

Tony Cohn: We caught one of Wall's performances at this summer's Smithsonian Folklife Festival, to see the Vaudeville style of juggling. Really, it's the closest we could get to seeing Cinquevalli perform live. The Folklife Festival is an annual event that's held on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. and brings arts and culture to life, and the 2017 Festival focused on the circus arts, including juggling. Wall's a very dynamic performer. His performance includes a lot of banter with the audience.

Thomas Wall Performing: What's going to happen here is I'm going to balance this table on my face. I will then throw a ball and catch it on the platform. I will bounce the ball on the platform, while the platform is balanced. And then, I will juggle for literally a fraction of a second.

Tony Cohn: And he does the kinds of tricks that would be at home in Cinquevalli's repertoire.

[CROWD APPLAUSE]

Thomas Wall Performing: I just got back from a tour in Japan. The great country of Japan. I was there 18 months, sort of on accident. That's a long story, but I learned some of the famous Edo Daikagura juggling tricks. Edo Daikagura is a form of ceremonial juggling. Here, we're just going to be doing it for just plain old-fashioned American entertainment. How does that sound to you? Huh?

[CROWD APPLAUSE & LAUGHTER]

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Thomas Wall Performing: This is a trick that has a very complicated Japanese name that roughly translates to, "that trick with a stick and teacup."

Tony Cohn: In the trick, Wall is performing right now, he balances a four-foot-long stick with a small platform on top on his chin! Think of it as a really tall bar stool with one leg. Sitting on the top of the platform is a teacup. Wall then takes a string, wraps it around the stick and is able to hold the cup on the platform, just using the string. It is a little hard to explain, but the effect is that the cup and the platform are defying gravity, supported only by a piece of string. If you don't believe me, ask these guys.

[CROWD CHEER & APPLAUSE]

Thomas Wall Performing: Oh yeah! How 'bout that?

[CROWD CHEER & APPLAUSE]

Tony Cohn: But very much like in Cinquevalli's time, sometimes audiences don't trust their eyes to tell them the whole story.

[CROWD CHEER & APPLAUSE]

Thomas Wall Performing: Do we have any questions at this point? Any questions? We've got a question here!

[MUSIC]

Thomas Wall Performing: What's this?

Little Girl: Do you use magnets?

Tony Cohn: It's a little hard to hear over the music, but a little girl just asked if he used magnets.

Thomas Wall Performing: Guys, can I get on my soapbox for a second? A lot of times, jugglers get accused for doing things with magnets to make things more possible. And in my own work, I strive to make things... there's no gimmicks in the work that I do. A lot of the work that I do, I, I have to go through old videos, I have to go through old photographs to find these tricks that have not been performed in years. And imagine how they might make this stuff work. You have to figure all this stuff out on your own. And yes, maybe a magnet would help it, but I'd rather not do that. I'm just showing you honest to God juggling guys. This is honest juggling. This is juggling from the heart!

[MUSIC]

Kid: I believe you!

Thom Wall Performing: You juggle from your hands, your head and your heart.

[CROWD APPLAUSE]

Thom Wall Performing: Yeah!

Thom Wall: I don't even see how a magnet would play in any of that. I'm balancing a stick on a piece of string.

Tony Cohn: Yeeeaahhh. I wouldn't need a magnet. I would need some hard-core crazy glue. And because Wall is inventing ways to perform forgotten tricks, he has to make a lot of the props that he uses during shows, which is yet another talent he shares with Cinquevalli's.

Thom Wall: So, I had a knife in my teeth and I balanced a wine glass on the sharp edge of the knife.

Tony Cohn: ...while holding the end of the knife in his mouth.

Thom Wall: Well, first off, there's nowhere that you can buy a knife shaped mouth stick like that. It is a knife I got at the store and I put a piece of wood on the end and covered it in leather and then slowly was able to work the impressions of my teeth into it so it would act like a part of my jaw. And then from there, it took maybe six months of just pure trial and error to be able to balance a glass on the sharp of the knife. And it's a really frustrating process, but this kind of reverse engineering, you know, where you see a trick or see a picture of a trick or hear something described and trying to figure out exactly how it's done. Like, that's, that's a real kind of magic.

[CROWD APPLAUSE & CHEERING]

Tony Cohn: And it's tricks like these that toe the edge of what seems possible and leave audiences amazed.

[CROWD APPLAUSE & CHEERING]

Thom Wall Performing: Oh, yes!

[CROWD APPLAUSE & CHEERING]

Thom Wall Performing: (Laughs). Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Thom! That's my show! If you'd like an autograph, well, I'd be really surprised.

[CROWD APPLAUSE & LAUGHTER]

Thom Wall Performing: Thanks for coming out everybody, enjoy the rest of your day here on the mall.

[CROWD APPLAUSE & CHEERING]

Tony Cohn: We spoke with some kids after the show, who were very impressed with the apparent danger of some of Wall's tricks. They also give you a vague sense of all the other tricks we saw Wall perform.

Kid 1: Because a lot of the things, I thought he was going to die for.

Tony Cohn: (Laughs). You thought he was going to die?

Kid 1: Yeah!

Tony Cohn: Did he? (Laughs).

Kid 1: No!

Kid 2: He was balancing a sword on the tip...

Kid 3: ...of a knife.

Kid 2: ...of a blade that he had in his mouth and then he started spinning it and doing the splits.

Kid 4: He holded on his mouth again, sideways. And he put the candle stick on top of the balloon and it didn't pop, until he put this flower on it and it popped. He didn't even die! He didn't die.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Coming up, we hear about Cinquevalli's global fame as a juggler, and look at how his performances still resonate today. We'll be right back, after this break.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: So, when we left Cinquevalli, he was amazing British audiences with the most remarkable juggling, strength and balancing feats that anybody had ever seen. And after a brush with Royalty, he was poised to take on the world and become a star.

Erik Aberg: He was very wealthy.

Tony Cohn: That's Erik Aberg again. He's our Cinquevalli historian, who we spoke with earlier.

Erik Aberg: He lived in the part of town in London where all the famous musical performers live. And I've been to his house. It's a very nice house.

Tony Cohn: But, being one of the world's most famous performers, wasn't without its own risks.

Erik Aberg: He would throw a cannon ball into the air and then bend forward and catch it on his neck. And there's all these stories about this trick, that he would sometimes be knocked out. And then the next day, in the press, he would come out and say that it was a lie and he was never knocked out at all.

Tony Cohn: This story reminded me of a comment Cinquevalli once made to a newspaper reporter about his stagecraft.

[MUSIC]

Paul Cinquevalli: I often fall, or rather pretend to fall, just to give the audience an idea of the difficulty of a trick, for being performed with such apparent ease, people fail to grasp the fact that this perfection, in this instance, may be the result of years of the severest efforts.

Tony Cohn: We've done a lot of research on Cinquevalli and his performances, and it's hard to believe some of them are actually possible. This cannon ball trick was written up in too many newspapers to doubt that it happened, but it's hard to believe that he was never knocked out by a 48-pound cannon ball landing on his neck. Cinquevalli did know one thing though; if he could influence how the press covered him, it would only add to his legend.

Erik Aberg: There's even evidence that he bribed journalists to write about him.

Tony Cohn: Do you think he was bribing journalists because he wanted press or because he wanted them to hyperbolize what he was doing?

Erik Aberg: I think he bribed them and that is a tradition in the circus; in the old-time circus, that you would do that.

Tony Cohn: For the next 30 years, he toured through Europe, North and South America, India, Australia, and New Zealand. And, you can still find a newspaper trail of stories praising Cinquevalli's performances from every corner of the world.

[MUSIC]

[TYPEWRITER TYPING SFX]

Newspaper Article: No one has ever equaled Cinquevalli within our memory.

Newspaper Article: Though the general programme on Saturday was an excellent one, individual performances were totally eclipsed by the remarkable juggling and feats of equilibrium displayed by Paul Cinquevalli.

Newspaper Article: Probably no better artist than Cinquevalli is now appearing on the vaudeville stage.

Newspaper Article: His feats with a cannon ball are simply bewildering.

Newspaper Article: And his fame has been confirmed by the press of the whole world.

[MUSIC]

[TYPEWRITER TYPING SFX]

Tony Cohn: These articles described tricks similar to those he was doing in London and Paris, but others tell tales that were pretty wild. For example, once in Chicago, he had an assistant drop a turnip from the top of a very tall building. Newspapers say Cinquevalli caught it on a fork that he held in his mouth. I mean, most of the time, I can't even catch keys, when my roommate tosses them to me. It's the kind of stunt that might not feel like juggling, but I would definitely pay money to see it. For his whole life, Cinquevalli toured big cities and small towns nonstop. He tried retiring on a couple of occasions; once when he was 45, and then again, when he was 50, but he told people that he never really knew what to do with himself. So, he always came back to the stage. That is, until 1914. At the beginning of World War I, Great Britain was not a friendly place for Germans.

[MUSIC]

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Tony Cohn: Germany, after all, was the enemy. And Cinquevalli's heritage, and his real name, Emil Braun, left him ostracized by the British public.

[MUSIC]

Erik Aberg: That's another kind of tragedy because, since he had this German-Polish heritage, and people knew about that, when the first World War came, he was seen as the enemy. It was not a good situation for Germans in England around 1913, 1914.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Cinquevalli, who had once been the toast of the British Empire, just wasn't wanted anymore.

[MUSIC]

Erik Aberg: I think he was also a sensitive guy. That's at least the feeling that I have of him, that he wanted to be loved. It was very important to him. And then, when people started to, you know, talk badly about him, he took it really hard.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: He stopped touring, and quietly, without any fanfare, he just retired to his home in London. He was 55.

[MUSIC]

Erik Aberg: One thing that was common for artists around that time is when they would retire, they would do a farewell tour. And Cinquevalli, he never made a farewell tour in England. He went to Australia and did his farewell tour over there. And in England, he just quit.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: What's the value of a performer who can't perform? Cinquevalli clearly didn't know. And, like his earlier retirements, this one was pretty short lived as well, but for a different reason. After four years of retirement, Cinquevalli's body just gave up.

[MUSIC]

Erik Aberg: They say that he died from a broken heart. He was only 59 years old and he was in his home playing piano to a friend and he died from heart failure. So, that is in 1918, before the war had ended. So, that's pretty much where that story ends.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Okay. That's not where the story really ends. Fame, just like a juggling performance, is fleeting. What goes up, must come down.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: And the same goes for even the biggest names like Paul Cinquevalli's once was. Someone can be known all around the world in one century and forgotten the next.

[MUSIC]

Thom Wall: Another thing is that there's no video of him, and the fact that video isn't on YouTube, maybe that's, (laughs), maybe that's a problem.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: In Cinquevalli's case, as is the case with many Vaudeville stars, his fame was surpassed by seismic changes in the technology of entertainment. The film industry was rapidly growing, eclipsing Vaudeville stage shows.

[MUSIC]

Thom Wall: The nature of a physical performing art is the second that the curtain closes, it disappears. The only thing that's left is the memory of the audience.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: With no visual record of his performances, audiences moved on and Cinquevalli was largely forgotten, except in the small juggling circles of performers who tried his tricks and told his stories.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: The best possible memorial to the man, who was one of the world's most famous entertainers, is to keep his craft alive and juggling certainly is alive. An estimated 92% of the country's 300 schools that teach juggling, tumbling and other circus arts have started in the last 10 years. And from schools, to Cirque du Soleil, to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, juggling continues to hold a vibrant place in our culture, imprinting future generations with the lessons that: if you can imagine something, and work at it for a long time, no matter how improbable it seems, you can catch that cannon ball on your neck.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: On our website, that's si.edu/Sidedoor, we have links to videos of Thom Wall's gentleman juggling act, as well as some still photos of Paul Cinquevalli. And if you like this episode, don't forget to subscribe on Apple Podcasts and maybe even leave us a nice little review.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: And also, tell a friend, because both of those things help us a lot, and we keep bringing the show to you.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Our show's music is by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Special thanks this week to everybody who lent their voice to bring Cinquevalli and our newspaper articles to life: Nico Porcaro, Elisabeth Pilger, Alison Leithner, Casey McAdams and Justin O'Neill. Also, thanks to Preston Scott as well as the Trapeze School New York, here in Washington, D.C.

[MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: Sidedoor is produced by Justin O'Neill, Stacia Brown, Jason Orfanon, Gabe Kosowitz, and Jess Sadeq. Extra support comes from John Barth, Genevieve Sponsler and Barbara Rehm. I'm your host, Tony Cohn. Thanks for listening!

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