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PS21: CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

## At PS21, 'SMASHED2' explores gender and violence — through juggling

By Aaron Simon Gross, The Berkshire Eagle 17 hrs ago 4 min to read



In "SMASHED2," the jugglers use 80 oranges and seven watermelons as part of the act. MARINA LEVITSKAYA — GANDINI JUGGLING

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CHATHAM, N.Y. — Sean Gandini is always searching for new things to juggle.

And for new body parts to juggle those things with.

One time, Gandini — widely recognized as a leading artist in the contemporary juggling movement — wondered if it was possible to catch a watermelon with his feet.

"You wouldn't imagine seven women in 1950s dresses balancing watermelons on their feet," Gandini said in an interview with The Eagle. "We don't see it every day."

Audiences do see it, however, in Gandini Juggling's "SMASHED2," a show by his London-based company having its New York premiere, 8 p.m. July 12 and 13, at PS21: Center for Contemporary Performance.

### Onstage

**What:** "SMASHED2"

**Who:** Gandini Juggling

**Where:** Pavilion Theater, PS21: Center for Contemporary Art and Performance, 2980 Route 66, Chatham, N.Y.

**When:** 8 p.m., July 12-13

**Tickets:** \$35, general; \$15, students; \$155, including Fancy Feast Supper Club pre-show dinner July 13

**Information and reservations:** 518-392-6121, [ps21chatham.org](https://ps21chatham.org)

"I have a hard time knowing how people think of juggling, because I'm in a world where everybody juggles and it's just a part of our lives," Gandini said.

When his company recently staged a show in their hometown London, Gandini was surprised by the press.

"So many articles went, 'you wouldn't normally imagine enjoying an hour of juggling,' and to me, that's — of course you would! Because it's great! Maybe they imagine a street performer or a jester or somebody in the circus" he said. "And juggling is that, as well. The same way that music can be opera, but it also can be somebody playing on the street."

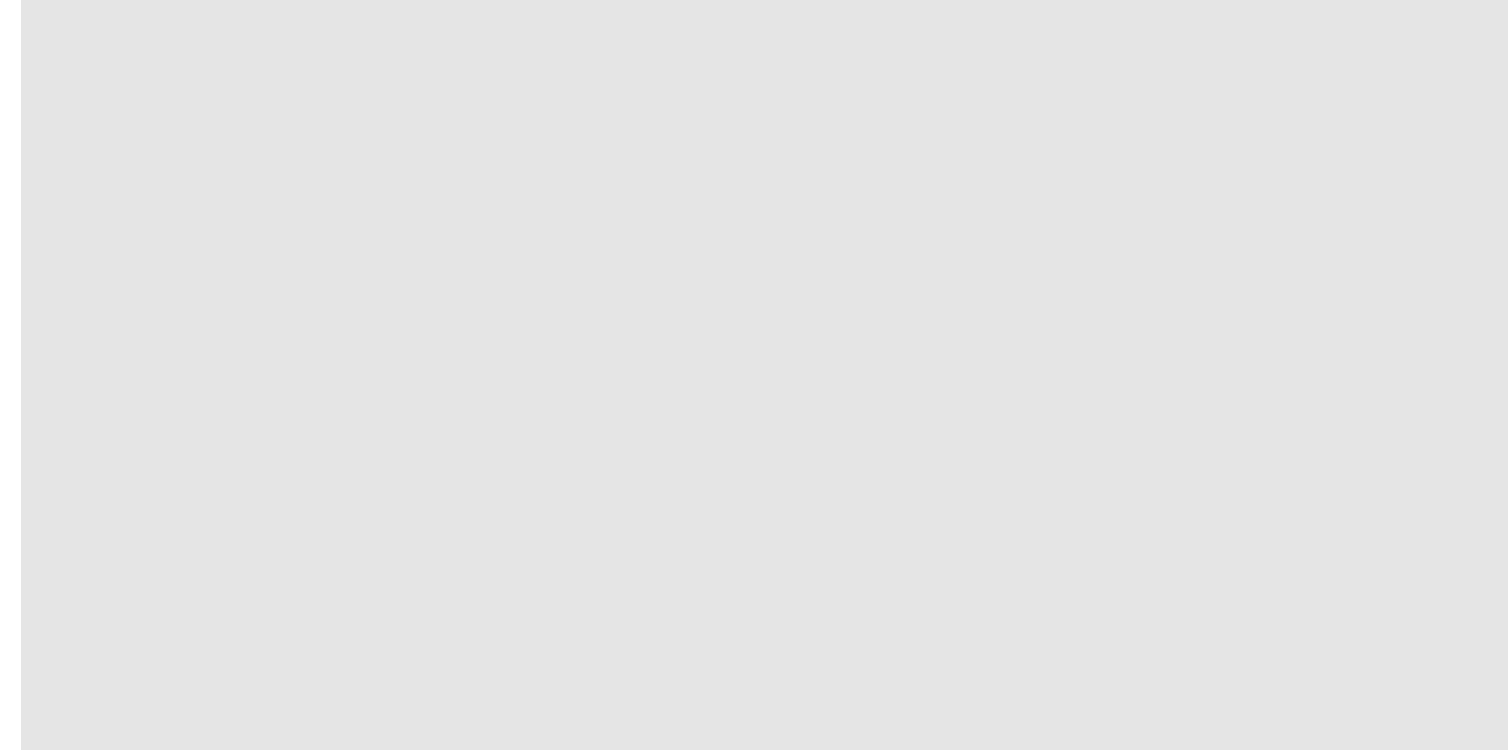
When Gandini and his wife, Kati Ylä-Hokkala, founded their company in 1992, they operated from a strictly anti-narrative mindset.

"We were very influenced by American postmodern dance, so we made these really hardcore experimental pieces that were just about movement juggling," Gandini said.

### REVELATORY MOMENT

After 10 years, almost on a whim, they decided to crack open the door to the possibility of the narrative. The results were revelatory.

"Juggling could be whatever we wanted," he said. "It's a very young art form, even though it's been around thousands of years. Using it choreographically is very young, so the potential is enormous."



Sean Gandini, right, first fell in love with juggling after seeing people practicing the art form in Covent Garden, London. Years later, he met his wife Kati Ylä-Hokkala when she saw him juggling in Covent Garden and said hello. PHOTO BY CAMILLA GREENWELL

Long before staging "SMASHED2," Gandini had imagined creating a juggling installation piece, inspired by choreographer William Forsyth's dancer-free dance installations. The installation would include just 20 watermelons and a sign that read, "Watermelons are Impossible to Juggle."

"It's something really absurd, it hints at juggling — but also at the impossibility of it," Gandini explained.

As the title "SMASHED2" suggests, Gandini Juggling previously produced a work called "Smashed," using seven men, two women and 100 red apples to explore — as many audience members interpreted it — gender dynamics.

"I felt it was a realistic portrayal of the world, including the atrocious violence that men commit against women," Gandini said. "But a lot of people questioned that."

"Smashed" earned rave reviews but disgruntled audience members, as Gandini remembers it, would stay after to ask questions like, "Why are you depicting this horrible thing?" or "Why can't the women get revenge?"

That led Gandini and Ylä-Hokkala to envision a show that flipped the gender dynamics of "Smashed." This time, there'd be seven women and two men, and the women would be the aggressors.

"Something I always really liked in [choreographer] Pina Bausch's work was this ambiguous morality. It doesn't tell you what's right or wrong," Gandini said. "I get nervous about art that tells you how to think."

Since they started performing "SMASHED2" — again, to rave reviews — Gandini has heard audiences frustrated by it, insisting that violence towards men is not the solution.

"But we're not prescribing that, obviously," he said. "We're just showing a hypothetical world. It's funny someone would read it as — there's sometimes a confusion that a piece of part is prescribing what it's showing which is, of course not the case. You're displaying an image."

### SPHERICAL SUMMER MEAL

Before the performance on July 13, Leah Guadagnoli, of [Fancy Feast Supper Club](#), will host a PS21 Supper Club six-course vegetarian dinner, highlighting ingredients that could be easily juggled — round bulbs of radicchio or sticks of summer squash.

"I didn't want to be too gimmicky with it," Guadagnoli said. "But it's a spherical summer meal." She knows that in "SMASHED2," the performers juggle seven watermelons and 80 oranges.

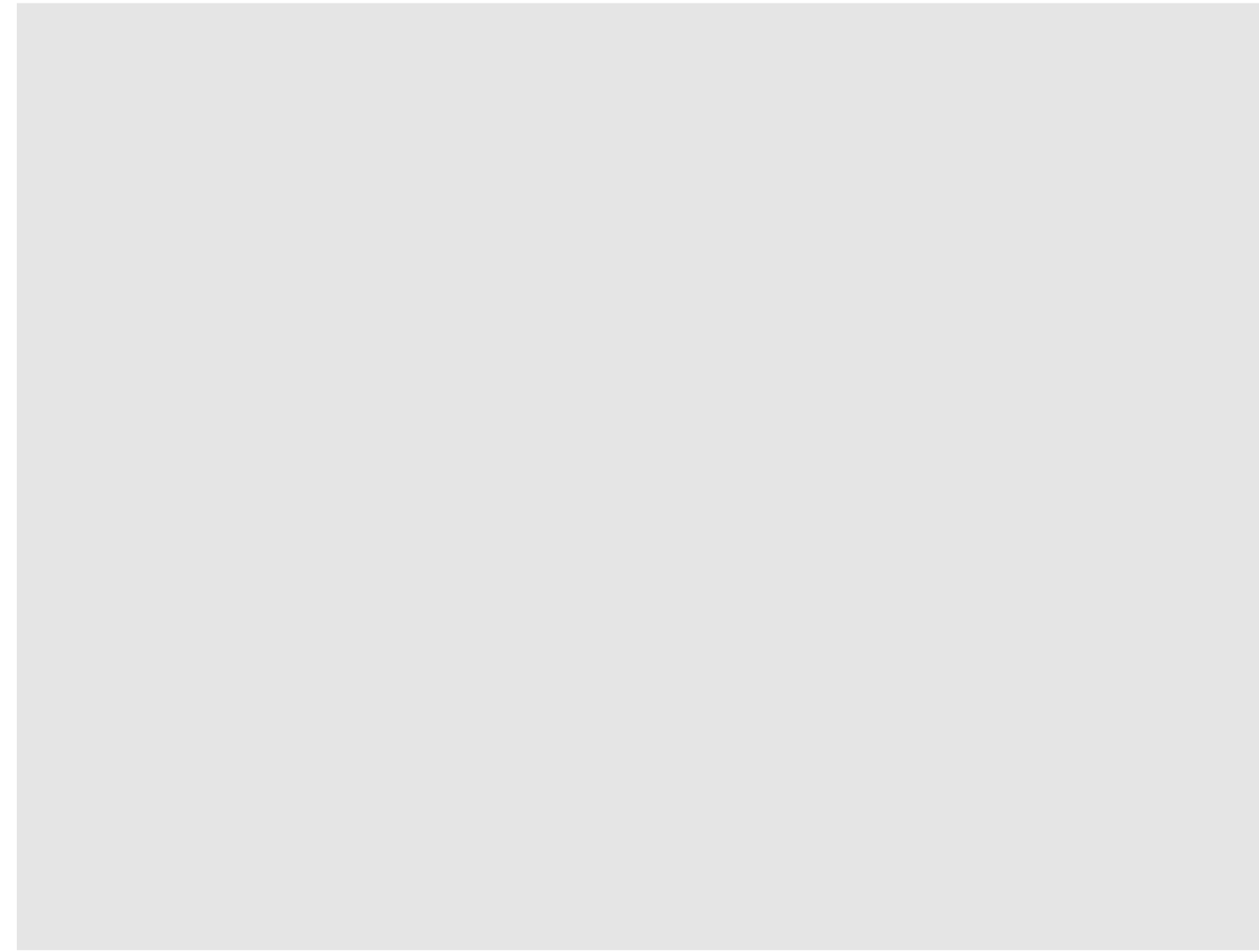
"Oranges aren't in season, so we're not going to be eating them," Guadagnoli said. "But watermelons, yes."

The watermelons will be served in a summer salad alongside that radicchio, while the summer squash will be served with whipped ricotta, brown butter chickpeas and hazelnuts. For dessert, a parmesan gelato and local berries with rosemary butter cookies, called a "fancy ice cream sandwich."

Gandini often thinks about the origins of ballet as a royal art form, one of the fancy elite. "If the French king had liked juggling instead, perhaps we'd have a world full of juggling houses and the ballerinas would be out on the street with their little pointe shoes!" he observed.

### THE FUTURE

Envisioning a future for his art form, he hopes that people are able to drop a preconceived, singular notion of what juggling is; the path toward that is to mark work that engages people in conversation.



In researching "SMASHED2" the artists watched many Korean revenge films, as well as Hollywood classics like "Thelma and Louise." PHOTO BY MARINA LEVITSKAYA

"Juggling has gone through quite a revolution in the last 30, 40 years. It's evolved from an art form where jugglers had maybe 40 patterns of dramatic structures, to an art form that's mixing and mingling with theater and dance, and has about a million patterns at its fingertips. It's kind of the golden age of juggling," Gandini said.

And at the end of the day, it's still juggling.

"We love throwing things and catching things in an organized way," he added. "That's our starting point."

### ONSTAGE

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