

SOME LIKE IT HOT

As their popularity surges, fire performers seek legitimacy.

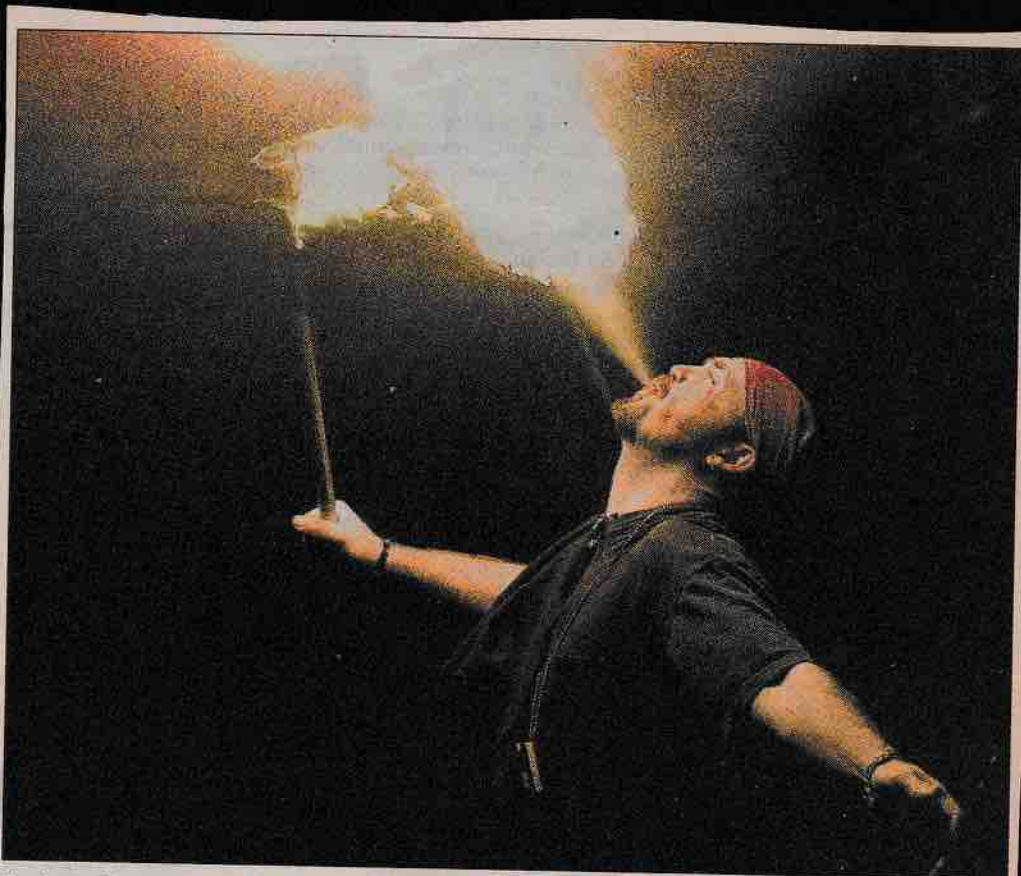
By JUSTIN HAMPTON
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

After 9 on Wednesday nights in downtown L.A., a usually abandoned parking lot catches fire. Soot-covered toolboxes, fire extinguishers, fireproof duvetyrn blankets and metallic canisters of white gas are stacked on the asphalt. And a colorful group of characters ranging from young professionals to street performers and pink-haired ravers pull their hair back and reveal their identities as pyrophiles, members of Los Angeles' growing community of fire performers.

This informal practice group, called Fireplay, has been meeting here for a year and a half, bringing together a crowd of about 50 to trade information on upcoming performances, teach newcomers, practice acrobatic moves and dance steps, and occasionally "light up" their equipment.

Some juggle burning torches. Others might dance with "poi," flaming rectangular wicks that hang at intervals along chains or cables and swing across the body in incandescent streaks. Whatever the tool or technique, the goal is the same: to channel fire's paradoxical nature into fun, spiritual fulfillment—and even rent-paying gigs at raves, dance clubs and in films.

Once underground, pyrophile communities like Fireplay now thrive in practically every continent and communicate with each other through international online destinations such as Home of Poi. Dance clubs and films like "Charlie's Angels," "The Beach" and "Queen of the Damned" have tapped the chic atavism of the fire phenomenon for background flavor. A disparate group of acolytes ranging from ravers and Goths to Renaissance Fair attendees has discovered common ground in an undertaking at once universal and intensely tribal. And with the resurgent popularity comes a new desire for legitimacy, as local pyrophiles seek to adjust laws and public perception to support their ambitions.



Kevin Rolly, who lives in Los Angeles, performs fire-breathing, a trick that's centuries old.

Essentially, a typical performance consists of a provocatively dressed performer dancing with flaming props—poi, batons or ornate finger extensions with wicks on the ends—until the fire goes out. There's no denying that the inherent danger of manipulating fire accounts for some of its appeal, says James Taylor, author of the circus sideshow periodical *Shocked and Amazed! On and Off the Midway*.

"Fire fascinates people, because you're like a rising phoenix out of it. You're going into what people fear, and you're coming out of it apparently unscathed, surviving the worst that nature can throw at you. Fire plays with all of our primal fears at the base. [It's like] 'This is nothing any normal and intelligent human should do, and here are people playing with it like it's where they live.' It's very hard to top that as an act."

But invincibility is a hard-won illusion. Most longtime fire

dancers have been burned at least once in their careers, and fire-breathers can suffer crippling "blowbacks" of the flame into their face or throat, as well as kidney and liver failures brought about by ingesting fuel.

E. J. "Tedward" LeCouteur, an L.A. fire aficionado, has developed a cottage industry within this growing community by selling poi chains, Kevlar wicks and other fire tools and toys through his online company Bearclaw Manufacturing (www.bearclawmfg.com). All are designed to be safer than those equipment performers make themselves.

Like many who now work with fire, LeCouteur first made contact with serious fire performance at the annual Burning Man Arts Festival in northwestern Nevada. He speaks fondly of a moment in the festival when he displayed his 10-year experience as a kendo instructor with a pair of flaming swords for an

awe-struck crowd. Laid off from his job as a management information systems specialist, LeCouteur turned to making fire apparatuses.

At Fireplay, LeCouteur frequently safety-tests his equipment, which includes an ignitable fire whip and a pair of Kevlar wick-lined fiberglass batwings that extend from the performer's back. He also rehearses there with the fire performance troupe the Flamethrowers, who perform at clubs and social functions throughout Los Angeles.

Such paying jobs are hard to come by. Venue owners are jumpy and permits costly. The Los Angeles Fire Department requires "open flame acts" to submit a written permit proposal. Then typically, a fire marshal will witness the act as well as a pre-performance run-through—with the promoter paying the marshal \$55 an hour for a four-hour minimum, says Inspector Michael Riley of the LAFD's Public Assemblage Unit.

When pyrophiles meet, they practice fire tricks like this dance by Kandice Bishop of Granada Hills inside a hoop of flames.

Photos by KEN HIVELEY / Los Angeles Times



Since most performers are lucky to net \$150 for an entire night, many of them believe there is a

better, more cost-effective way of making everyone happy: set-

ting professional standards.

LeCouteur has founded the North American Fire Arts Assn.,

a professional guild that seeks to establish a national profes-

sional policy based on the safety rules and requirements serious

fire performers already follow.

"The idea is that if our internal

quality guidelines are harsher

than what the individual states

would apply, then guild mem-

bership and accreditation

would account for more than

state licensing would in and of

itself," he asserts.

The plan has a ways to go. Lo-

cal fire officials have jurisdiction

over open flame acts, says the

state fire marshal's office, so any

guidelines would have to be ap-

proved locally by locality.

And defining what consti-
tutes a safe fire performance
isn't easy, says LeCouteur. He's
working to do that with other
Fire Arts Assn. members, mainly
senior members of the Burning
Man Festival's Fire Conclave,
which fire-dances around the an-
nual "Burn." The aim, he says, is
"making sure that you're not
taking undue risks that could
potentially endanger some-
body's life. Some of them are ob-
vious. Some of them are very
subtle, like you have to keep
your fuel capped when you're
indoors. It might let off a vapor
cloud that could take any spark
in 100 meters and transfer it
back to the source."

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sure most national fire per-
formers through his brokerage
firm Clowns of the U.S. In seven
years of insuring fire perform-
ers, he says they have yet to file a
claim. "I don't see any more
danger with these [fire perform-
ers] as with someone falling off
of a high wire. They're really
careful. So we have no qualms
with them doing this."

As artists, fire performers are
also pushing forward. Moving
beyond the brief solo presenta-
tions of most modern fire per-
formances, troupes such as
L.A.'s Midnight Sun, San Fran-
cisco's Seeds of Fire and Seattle's
Cirque du Flambe are integrat-
ing fire performance with thea-
ter, dance and acrobatics.

"Anybody can jump around
and spin fire and the audience
will go, 'Ooo, ahhh!' But can you
take it to the next step, where it's
not the whole focus, but some-
thing you're using as part of
your art?" asks Crimson Rose,
leader of the Burning Man Festi-
val's Fire Conclave. "It isn't,
Here, let me spin around." It's
actually the whole dynamics,
where you're building some-
thing to a height and you're
coming back down. That's really
what I'm seeing happen with
these groups."