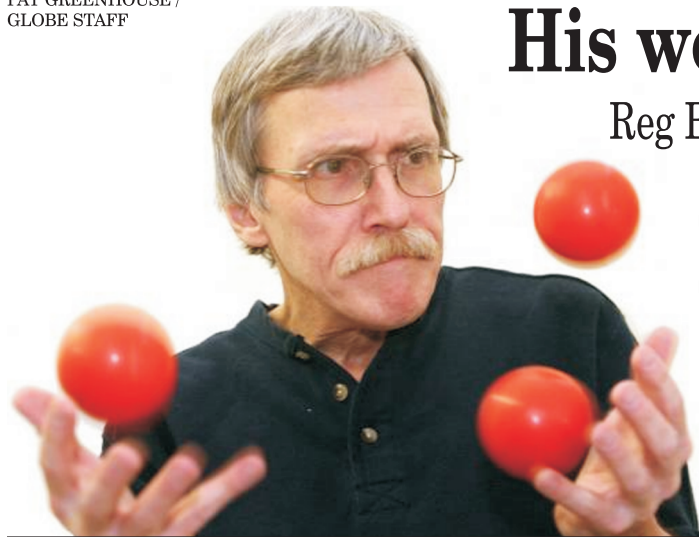


PAT GREENHOUSE /  
GLOBE STAFF

# His work is a real juggling act

## Reg Bacon shaped zany scene in 'Pink Panther' film

**Professional juggler Reg Bacon is the picture of concentration as he demonstrates "The Box" in his low and fast style – thousands of repetitions with heavy training balls.**

**By Joel Brown**

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The critics have not been kind to Steve Martin's "Pink Panther 2," but the Screening Room here, normally home to works of higher cinematic aspiration, has booked the film for two weeks, tomorrow through March 19. Why? Local acrobatic juggler Reg Bacon had a key role in creating a scene of controlled chaos that many reviewers called a bright spot. And he's not even seen, except perhaps for a hand or a foot.

"They said, 'If you do a good job teaching Steve, you might not even be in the movie.' I was totally fine with that," Bacon said.

In the rehearsal studio of his home here, Bacon appeared a gentle, scholarly sort, gray-haired and bespectacled at 59, hardly the typical vaudevillian wisecracker.

Then he said, "Let me give you a sample."

Instantly, he grabbed a large circus globe and hopped up on top of it, moving around the room by rolling the ball with his feet.

Then he started jumping rope up there.

Over a year ago, Bacon lent his talents in juggling and gag design to the made-in-Massachusetts "Pink Panther 2." Bacon takes Hollywood with a grain of salt, but he couldn't pass up the chance to work with comic legends Steve Martin and John Cleese.

Bacon, who grew up in Massachusetts and New York, has show-biz roots going back a couple of generations. One grandmother was a silent moviehouse pianist. His father spent years in the Navy and merchant marine, passing long hours at sea mastering elegant sleight-of-hand that gave him a career in the post-World War II nightclub scene. He later gained notice with a Houdini-like escape act – he appears on a poster in the memorabilia-crowded studio as The Great Hardeeni, "Escapologist, self-liberationist and master manipulator of manacles."

Bacon himself was "a nut about ball sports" as a youth. A graduate of Syracuse University with a degree in journalism, he worked as a reporter, editor, and publication designer, and in his off-hours pursued his hobby as a jazz, blues, and ragtime musician.

During a stint playing his music for a troupe of acrobatic dancers, he learned the rudiments of juggling, and immediately thought "Why didn't I learn this when I was 10!" In his mid-20s, he poured 10 years-worth of obsessive practice into the next three years, connected with masters who became mentors, and honed a stage presentation that incorporated music, song, dance, comedy, unicycling, and juggling.

In 1975 he took what he thought would be a temporary break from his journalism career to fulfill several months of summer engagements. But the bookings never ran dry, so he kept filling the calendar, polishing the performance, and making new contacts with agents.

Meanwhile he teamed with his wife, juggler L.J. Newton, to create and choreograph a precision club-passing act. In 1977 they began 23 years of touring nationally as a duo in nearly every kind of venue. L.J. retired from the stage in 1999, while Bacon carried on with his solo act.

In recent times, after graduate studies at Harvard, his energies are devoted to assembling a museum presentation and exhibition on the history of vaudeville. Then a longtime agent contacted him with news that "Pink Panther 2" needed a juggling waiter, for years a characterization in his stage presentation.

The movie sequence finds Martin's Inspector Clouseau dining in a restaurant called La Plata de Nada (The Plate of Nothing). Showing off for love interest Emily Mortimer, he helps himself from a large wine rack. Bottles begin to fall, Clouseau/Martin tries to catch them all, but tosses the overflow to Bacon's team of juggling waiters. Soon the air is full of flying bottles.

In 2007, Bacon spent weeks in the Chelsea warehouse where the film's indoor sets were built, breaking the scene down into 25 to 30 parts and practicing them on stunt mats. On the day before the sequence was shot, the producer announced to Bacon that they wanted it to look a little different: Specifically, they didn't want it to look like juggling.

"That was crunch time on the set," Bacon said. "We were jammed in there, with 60 extras, on a set all dressed as if it was a fine restaurant. There was not a lot of room for movement." Or for error.

Ironically, their work was so good that one reviewer who praised the sequence found it literally inhuman. In the Washington Post, John Anderson called the sequence one of the film's "two moments of absolute mirth." He went on to write, "That it's all a computer trick is obvious."

The rewards of Hollywood can be elusive. But working as Martin's double and juggling coach was a highlight, Bacon said.

"Steve has very good body control, but probably a more important characteristic is that he is an excellent listener," Bacon said. "You might think someone in his position, who is quite obviously multi-talented, might get to the point where they think they know everything ... but not Steve. He was very, very focused."

"We went over a routine where bottles keep coming at you, and you keep loading them up on your body. I had done this 500 times on the stunt mats, and I came up with a way to gather the greatest number of bottles," Bacon said.

"The way something like this is done successfully is to practice it the same way every time. Steve stood there and we fired bottles at him, and he grasped the finer point quickly, because he was watching every little detail."

Bacon still works as an editor and designer, and also as a museum guide at Historic New England sites in Newbury. His regional site manager organized an opening night gathering at the Screening Room.

"He started coming in to work with this funny little moustache and everybody was wondering what the heck was going on with him," said Bethany Groff, regional site manager for Historic New England. "He always had this mischievous I've-got-a-secret look on his face, and finally he came out with it. We all know him as this mild-mannered, historically thinking museum guide, but really he has this whole other showbusiness life," Groff said. "As soon as he told me about the movie, I just really wanted to see an event in the community."

Bacon seems to be girding himself for tomorrow night's experience.

"No fanfare!" Bacon says, with horror that doesn't seem to be entirely mock. "When I'm on stage, you're damn right I've got people watching and everybody in the palm of my hand. But when I'm off stage, I don't have to be the center of attention." ■

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