

Video Follies: The \$600 million corporate fiasco A 1970s juggler cavorts – and survives – on the frontier of the video revolution

By R.W. Bacon ©2011

By the late 1970s my performing career as a jazz/ragtime musician and comedy juggler-unicyclist had gained its own momentum. I was still working solo at this point, and could barely keep up with engagements, inquiries, and opportunities that were coming my way. I was doing entertainment on the college circuit, educational presentations in public & private schools, shows at corporate functions, and I was just beginning to work as a circus act. Typical of the range at the time, a show at the seedy Terminal Cafe on the Chelsea, Mass. waterfront might be followed by an engagement in New York City for a national TV show on PBS. In those days *all* the work was welcome, and energizing.

The recollections that follow tell of a time when a couple of lucky and well-paid jugglers found themselves (1) bit players on the frontier of the video revolution, (2) in the distant orbit of some great minds, and (3) witness to one of the most colossal product failures of the late 20th century.

A phone call – and a meeting at the mansion. In the chilly early spring of 1978 I received a telephone call from a freelance advertising professional who was rounding up colorful movement artists for a promotional film. This was to be a project for a major corporation, and had something to do with promoting a product. Details were sketchy, but she was especially interested in recruiting jugglers. Since this was before the crunch-time of my busiest touring and performance season, I agreed to attend a meeting a few days hence. She asked me to bring some props so I could perform a brief audition for



At the time of the Polavision project (1978), R.W. Bacon (“Mr. Slim”) was working solo, as seen in these publicity photos.



her and the other decision makers. I was given an address in Newton, Mass.

On the morning of the meeting I drove to the Newton address expecting to meet in an open studio space suitable for professional filming. Instead, I followed the directions and turned into the driveway of a lushly landscaped estate. The grounds were already awash with the first colorful blossoms of

spring. The main house was an elephantine late-19th-century shingle-style mansion. It probably had 20-25 rooms. The shaded wrap-around porch looked particularly inviting. It was in a screened-in area of the porch that I saw people assembling. This would be our project headquarters.

There were four of us reporting to the two project managers that morning: myself, fellow juggler Dario Pittore, and pantomime duo Jody Scalise and partner. (*At this writing, memory fails – her name will be inserted here as soon as it is determined.*) The project managers were two no-nonsense women in their late 30s who obviously had experience in calling the shots. (Unfortunately I remember little about either of them as individuals – only the words “cranky” and “joyless” come to mind.) The project managers told us that they had been hired by the Polaroid Corporation, the company that had pioneered “instant” photography, and that their crews would be filming our mini-performances for use as in-store demonstration of an all-new instant home video system. The long-awaited new

continued on next page

“Shoot, develop, and show color movies in minutes,” touted this 1978 full-page advertisement for the Polavision system in the Sears catalog.

Polaroid Corporation founder Edwin Land (1909-1991) drove Polavision to market even though consumer videotape cameras would soon be available. Land’s biographer wrote: “He pushed toward instant movies with greater stubbornness and recklessness than he had ever shown before in a life filled with risk-taking.”

As the ad describes, the user could drop a film cassette into the camera, shoot the movie, insert the cassette into the developer/viewer, wait about 90 seconds for film processing, and then watch the two-minute, 45-second movie – re-wound and rear-projected from inside the viewer onto the screen.

The ad notes that “the Portable Polavision Player develops and plays cassettes, yet weighs just 24 pounds ... no bulky screens to set up.”

The entire system cost \$675 (\$2243 in 2011 dollars). Film cassettes cost \$7.99 each (\$26.59 in 2011).

A juggler on the frontier of the video revolution

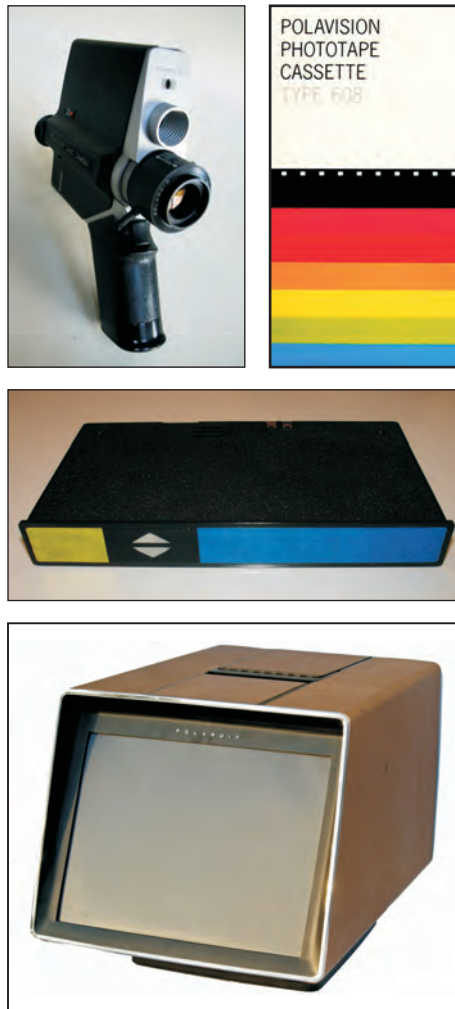
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technology, called “Polavision” by its developer, was to be available to consumers across the country within a few months.

Polavision – on the frontier of the home video revolution. The technology and the product, championed for years by the company founder himself, Edwin Land (1909-1991), worked like this: You bought the system for \$675 (\$2243 in 2011 dollars!), which included a small movie camera, cassettes (\$7.99 each ... \$26.59 in 2011!), and a combination developer/viewer. The camera, using an additive color technology and 40 ASA film, in effect captured 18 instant Polaroid pictures per second. The cassettes were about the size of an audio cassette. After filming a two-minute, 45-second cassette, you popped it in the developer. The machine developed the film, rewound the film, then played the film for viewing. The image was projected from behind on a small TV-like screen that was part of the same unit. (There was no sound. Mr. Land believed the quality of the sound on the Super-8-like film would be inferior.)

Today one might say “What’s the big deal?” But at that time, in the prehistoric 1970s, there was no such thing as “instant video.” Those who had home movie cameras had to transport their film to be processed, wait for a week or two for the film to come back, then set up the movie screen and projector to view it. The crankiest of the two project managers impressed upon us the magnitude of this technology and the huge market that awaited this new product. We listened reverently, and believed. During subsequent breaks that day, we performers agreed that this new technology was a big deal. This product could be very big. This was no small-time outfit. This was Polaroid. (And they certainly were not skimping on the budget for this promotional project. Even the lowly jugglers would be well-compensated.)

Part of Polaroid’s marketing plan was to get demonstrator systems in the camera section of every department store in the U.S. That is, there would be a demonstrator display in every single Sears & Roebuck, Montgomery Ward, Bloomingdale’s, etc., across the continent. Each store would be supplied with a selection of colorful, action-filled demonstrator cassettes to convince the public that the Polavision system was the must-have camera toy for the new age of instant home video. So, we finally had an understanding of the project: Our two drill-sergeant project managers were charged with producing the all-important demonstrator cassettes that would sell the new Polavision home video system. They had already recruited experienced film crews. We



The Polavision system was comprised of the camera (top left), the cassette (center), and the developer-viewer (bottom).

jugglers and movement artists would provide the on-screen action and color – and then in a few weeks our 8-inch high bodies would be seen waving and flailing on department store counters from coast-to-coast.

We learned that the filming would be done outside. The project manager gestured to an expansive lawn at the side of the property that sloped like a natural amphitheatre. Two boldly-colored fabric backdrops were already in place, set up next to each other like a couple of carnival joints, festooned with balloons. After a break we moved outside with our props and did a few tests for the camera, first with some still shots – Polaroids, of course – and then some Polavision cassettes. The mime duo had their own well-rehearsed comic piece, so they were ready to go to work. The two project managers had a meeting of minds and decided that Dario and I should work up a combination of solo and duo juggling bits. The idea was a good one. The contrast in style and body type was funny in itself, with

Dario at a very slender 6'6" and me at a more compact 5'10". Of course a choreographed juggling routine is not accomplished at the push of a button. That very day Dario and I set about to craft the routine and practice the duo juggling bits, trying our best to adapt to our height difference.

By the end of the first day we knew the ground rules of the project, but the next five weeks would bring one surprise after another about the product. In the ensuing years, and decades, I was surprised to learn even more about the Polavision fiasco.

Dario Pittore and our “Polavision Routine.” The enjoyable constant through the five weeks was working closely with Dario Pittore, and alongside (literally) Jody Scalise. Dario was in his early 20s and just beginning to make his way in his performing career. We worked hard to get the “Polavision routine” consistent and reliable, but we also shared plenty of laughs over the five weeks ... more than a few at the expense of the situation at hand. We joked for years that we could meet at age 80 and still execute our “Polavision routine” with grace. Jody Scalise was my age, and was already a master of mime and movement. It is ironic that years later he added juggling skills to his long list of specialties. I am glad to say that I am still in touch with both of these “fellow travelers” in the performing arts.

The routine (based on viewing a recently-salvaged and digitized cassette!): R.W. begins solo three-ball juggling, with head bobbing eccentrically, following a single ball through a pattern of overthrows and the tennis variation. This leads into a fast, low shower, reverse cascade, two-and-one variations, and body bounces. Dario enters from the right, and after a tapping R.W.’s shoulder, the two execute a flurry of run-around take-aways with three balls. Dario extends his long arms to juggle around R.W., who then sinks straight down out of the frame with a stupid frozen grin. Dario executes a series of body bounces and body throws with three balls before “cranking” himself, with a two-and-one trick, out of the frame to the left. Simultaneously, R.W. enters from the right juggling three clubs in a low, fast pattern with a shower of under-the-leg throws. As R.W. moves out to the left, Dario enters from the right juggling three rings, then turns 180 degrees to face right. R.W. then backs into the frame from the left, also juggling three rings. The roughly back-to-back ring juggling continues to the fade-out at 2:28.

Demonstrator cassettes – one-at-a-time. When we returned early the next week to begin the filming in earnest, we got our first surprise. “You guys are clear for the next few weeks, right?” asked the project manager. (Well, she really didn’t say it in a questioning tone.) We shrugged. We all had

continued on next page

A juggler on the frontier of the video revolution

continued from previous page

other engagements here and there. I was booked on every weekend, and had a couple of weekday engagements at schools to work around besides. We assumed that we could perfect our routines and get enough good takes on film over the course of a couple days. Not so. This would be a better payday and a longer engagement than we were led to believe at first. The reason? The Polavision technology was such that the cassettes could not be duplicated! In other words, every single demonstrator cassette that was needed to supply the nation's department stores would have to be filmed individually. Dario and I, Jody & partner would have to perform our short routines hundreds of times to make enough cassettes. This would be a long haul.

The weird wardrobe. Also new on this Monday morning was a pile of clothing that the project managers had bought for Dario and I. Apparently our respective colorful 70s stage wardrobe was not quite "over-the-top" enough, and the project managers went shopping for the boldest, loudest solid colors they could find. We tried on all the combinations they had for us. We were like reluctant models on the runway – they seemed to derive a perverse pleasure at our discomfort as we paraded the combinations in front of them for the umpteenth time. Their final picks for me were bright red pants and a sickly green open-necked t-shirt. For Dario, they chose a red t-shirt and sickly green pants. We wore matching fluffy bowties, and to top us off, backwards ballcaps – mine with a top-mounted propeller. This was the 1970s, so of course suspenders were part of the required juggler's uniform. Where they found the

pants and shirts I don't know, but this "Bozo Collection" was all cheap polyester, and for the physical stuff we were doing, it was stifling. It was like working out in the gym while wearing a plastic bag.

Once the wardrobe colors were settled, we went outside to film a few routines so the project managers could evaluate the way the color worked against the backdrop in the natural light of the bright sunny day. The action and motion of the juggling was important to sell the Polavision system, but equally important was the accurate rendering of rich and brilliant colors. So we would film a routine, the assistant would run the cassette into the house, and the project managers would develop it, view it, and decide what to adjust next. Meanwhile we waited around, pointing at each other's ridiculous outfits and laughing derisively. "Look at those green pants," I would jest. "You've got frog's legs!" Dario was more direct. "Oh yeah? What about your green shirt? It looks like puke!"

Filming ... and waiting. This filming-and-waiting and the fine-tuning of the lighting and color continued for the next few days. Each day was like a new experiment, however, because every day was different. A clear and bright day would be followed by a day of intermittent sun. On overcast days, we spent a lot of time sitting around, while the film and lighting wizards struggled to find the right settings. This hanging around was broken up by intense juggling workouts when the spirit moved us. The lull in the action also allowed us time to explore the grounds of the estate. We learned that one lone elderly gentleman lived there, but from time-to-time rented it for special projects such as this one. He wisely moved elsewhere temporarily to escape the hubbub. The main house was full of interesting nooks-and-crannies, from what I could see, but most of the house was off-

limits to us. There were several other buildings on the grounds, including a gardener's shed that was big enough for a family of four. When we grew tired of inspecting the beautiful flower gardens, talking, napping, juggling, or making fun of each other's pants, there was always lunch.

The determination of the project managers extended beyond working for a quality product – they were also determined to have the most lavish lunches possible on Polaroid's tab. Every morning at about 9:30 an assistant would come by to take everyone's individual order for a custom gourmet sandwich. About 12:30 p.m. a van would arrive from the fanciest deli in Newton with the custom-made giant sandwiches – plus buckets of potato salad, bean salad, and pickles. The project managers made a point to insist on the high-priced brands of potato chips and fruit drinks. A different truck arrived every morning to replenish the supply of fresh apples, oranges, grapes, cheese, and crackers that filled the "grazing platter." (This level of excess was not quite up to the Hollywood standard I would experience in later years, but close.)

For the first few days of experimentation, we performed our routines to one or two cameras at a time. When the project managers felt they had arrived at the right settings for the cameras, they brought in the full complement of film crews. Eventually each "set" had five cameras on tripods, fanned out in a tight semi-circle, filming the action at once. Each camera had its own operator and assistant. So, descending on the estate every morning were 10 camera operators, 10 assistants, and a handful of set directors, in addition to the project managers – and four performers. Each one of our two-minute, 40-second routines yielded five cassettes. On a good day with no problems, Dario and I would go through our routine

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At left, **R.W. Bacon** ("Mr. Slim") opens the "Polavision routine" with some fast-and-flashy ball juggling. The balls are heavy Cressite English dog balls. The insane grin may be the result of going through the routine 40 times a day for five weeks.

At right, **R.W. Bacon and Dario Pittore** juggle rings back-to-back until the fade-out of the two-min., 45-sec. cassette capacity.

These demonstrator cassettes were shown at department stores throughout the U.S.



A juggler on the frontier of the video revolution

continued from previous page

40-50 times between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., when the sun got too low in the sky. Jody and his partner kept the same pace, but did not have to worry about drops ... just fatigue. So under the best conditions, our combined efforts would yield a total of 500 cassettes in a day.

At the end of each day, we would gather on the porch and watch a handful of cassettes. Some had to be rejected in bundles of five, because of an inopportune drop or some other miscue. Because there was no sound, occasionally Dario and I would mutter softly to each other if our timing or technique was off. We would do this through a clenched smile, with minimal lip movement. Unfortunately some of these mutterings, like "What the hell?" ... or "Oh shit!" ... could be easily deciphered, even by a beginning lip-reader. Those cassettes went into the reject pile. After viewing many cassettes of both our routine and Jody's, it was clear why the project managers draped us in the loud colors: The product did not do very well with subtle shades. In the best cassettes, the colors were super-saturated. We came to accept this in the way an audience accepts the dancing elephant. The elephant does not have to dance very well. It is remarkable that the elephant can dance at all.

A crisis of color. We were on a roll for several days, despite a day off for rain and another day off so that I could fulfill a previously contracted engagement. When we resumed, it was mid-morning when our momentum mysteriously ground to a halt. Nobody actually yelled the single word "cut," but there were other multiple consonant-filled words of frustration yelled down from the porch that got the same message across. Despite all the finagling with the color at the beginning, the winning combination for the rich color was somehow lost. More adjustments followed. Then more experiments. Then more weird color. My sickly green shirt was starting to look yellowish-brown. My red pants were edging toward a brownish-purple, indeterminate hue. My face was an indescribable tone that did not look quite human. One entire day of experimentation yielded nothing but a stack of reject cassettes at eight bucks apiece. The project managers put out the call to a film and lighting expert in New York, and he was on a plane to Boston at dawn the next day.

The expert-for-hire was chauffeured to the set the next morning. Arriving from other points were truckloads of reflectors of all shapes and sizes. The expert worked all day, using everything in his considerable bag of tricks. He managed to get the project back on track by the precise positioning of

The photo at right shows the typical use of reflectors in a photo or video shoot. The Polavision project used truckloads of them.



reflectors – and the insistence that filming be done only within a narrow set of natural light conditions. (Why not film indoors under controlled conditions, you ask? The instant developing technology worked only with ASA 40 grade film. Consumers would achieve the best results filming outdoors in bright light. Mr. Land knew that the layman filming indoors in low light would get poor results, and he did not want to oversell the product's capability. So the demonstrator cassettes would show the action and color filmed outdoors only.) The expert stayed on for an extra day, and of course on this day the big puffy clouds rolled in and out. When a light breeze came up, the reflectors waved, causing an unintended psychedelic effect in the final product. More waiting. More adjusting of reflectors. By the time the expert left to go back to New York, probably with less hair than he had when he arrived, he told us his opinion of the Polavision system in some private muttering of his own: "Junk." It had grown clear to everyone on the crew that for the average consumer to get halfway-decent color from the Polavision system would require a minor miracle ... or the blind luck of a lottery winner.

The filming – and the slap-happy juggler team – rolls on. The days of filming rolled on. Some days we spent most of the time standing ready for just the right natural light conditions. Our crazy clothes burdened us like the convict's stripes – we



Above is an advertising photo of the Polavision instant home movie system.

didn't want to leave the grounds and be seen in public even during a three-hour overcast. So it was more waiting. More lunches. More juggling. Finally, after five weeks, the production managers announced we had finally met our goal. By the conclusion of filming, Dario and I were getting slap-happy, having repeated our routine hundreds of times. After five weeks on the project we knew that we would always share a special bond. Our biggest laugh was probably on the last day: We joked that we wanted to have a ceremonial burning of those hideous clothes, but the project managers didn't get the joke. They wanted the clothes back!

The checks clear, and the performers move on. I am glad to say the checks rolled in promptly, but there was no dwelling on the project, because my busiest travel and performance season was upon me. Once again it was time to look forward. Over the next year I heard from a number of friends across the country who had seen the Polavision display in stores, and watched Dario and I go through the paces on-screen. I made a point to visit an in-store Polavision display on just one occasion, when L.J. & I were on the road somewhere in Pennsylvania, and I must admit it was fun sauntering into the camera department and showing interest. The salesperson explained a little about it, and I asked if they had any cassettes to show me. She had a couple of cassettes, and I patiently waited for Dario and I to appear. I stood at the counter and scrunched up my face just like in my three-ball routine, and said "Gee, that guy looks familiar." She didn't get it. So I pointed to the screen and said in mock indignation "Hey, where'd you get this! That's me juggling on there!" She studied the screen and looked at me. "Oh my gawd!" she said. Then she laughed, realizing that I had been setting her up. I told her a little about the process of making the demonstrator cassettes, and by the time I left she felt that she was much more informed about the product.

Then what happened? Other than the one department store visit, it would be a few years before I picked up more details about the Polavision saga.

Edwin Land himself had announced Polavision to Polaroid stockholders with enthusiasm in May 1977, a little more than a year before the product hit the stores. The product was launched to great fanfare shortly after our filming was complete, bolstered by television ads featuring Danny Kaye. Later the company recruited perhaps the best-known pitchman of the era, Ed McMahon, for more TV ads.

As the summer of 1978 turned into fall, it was clear that the public was underwhelmed with Polavision. It did not help that *Consumer Reports* magazine called the dense

continued on next page

A juggler on the frontier of the video revolution

continued from previous page

film images “murky and dark.” Another industry observer wrote: “Polavision is a tradeoff of rotten quality for instant pictures.” Neither Ed McMahon, Danny Kaye, nor the cavorting jugglers or the sparkling mimes could save the product. In late 1979, less than two years after launch, the inventory was sold off as a job lot at a loss of \$68.5 million. Victor K. McElheny, author of the 1999 biography, *Insisting on the Impossible: The Life of Edwin Land*, wrote that Polavision cost the Polaroid Corporation \$500-600 million over four years, and over \$200 million in the last year alone. “Polavision was a bomb,” wrote McElheny. “One estimate is that only 60,000 out of 200,000 sets produced were sold. As Land had been warned, Polavision was too late and without sound, and was, according to Polaroid engineer Richard Weeks, ‘a marginal product launched into a rapidly changing marketplace.’” In hindsight, it is clear that, beyond Polavision’s color quality problems, were its steep price, lack of sound, small viewer, and two-minute-plus cassettes. Besides, more full-featured VCRs were imminent from several manufacturers. In 1980, Polaroid’s Edwin Land, an icon of mid-20th-century technology, resigned as the CEO

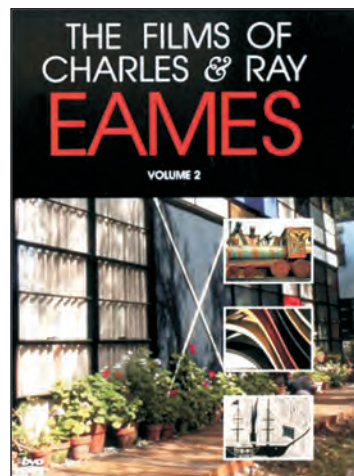
of the company he founded. Two years later he left the struggling company altogether. In late 2001, the company sought bankruptcy protection, and sold all its assets, including the name.

A product failure, a corporate collapse, and a human toll. In the mid-1990s I was at a friend’s house party when I met a gentleman who at the time was recently retired from a 30-year career at Polaroid. Of course I asked him if he knew anything about a product from the distant past called Polavision. The floodgates opened. That evening he told me more than I ever knew about the magnitude of the product failure and its impact on the company and its employees. This man was understandably bitter about the Polavision fiasco and how it decimated his retirement benefits built up over decades with the company.

The marketing of Polavision – Why all the jugglers? This meeting prompted me to explore the subject further via occasional readings, and my curiosity was fed by chance encounters with other former Polaroid employees. Little by little over the next several years I learned more background about the marketing campaign. I also learned that the selection of jugglers to promote the product was not a whim, but rather driven by admiration of the circus arts and a penchant for spectacle.

Polavision, Charles & Ray Eames, and the circus. First of all, included in the marketing for Polavision were a series of seven short films by Charles (1907-1978) and Ray Eames (1912-1988). They were a man-and-wife team of designers best known for their architecture, furniture design, and industrial design. As disciples and colleagues of Eliel Saarinen at the Cranbrook community in Michigan, and friends and collaborators with Eero Saarinen, Charles and Ray Eames were central to the development of mid-20th-century modernism. They are best known for their innovative bent plywood furniture, but they were also exhibition designers, multi-media artists, architects, product designers, and mask-makers. As filmmakers, they made over 80 short films. In 1972 Charles Eames was commissioned by Edwin Land to make a film for Polaroid to promote the SX-70 instant camera, but the film has endured as a veritable meditation on photography itself. (Charles Eames was an avid photographer. Upon his death in 1978 his archive held 750,000 slides.) The most notable of their Polavision films, *The Chase*, featured their daughter, Lucia Eames (b. 1930), chasing through the Eames study house and grounds, against the backdrop of the Pacific Palisade. The other films were *Polavision* (1977), and all in 1978, *Kites*, *Llisa Draws a Letter*, *Macbeth*, *Masks*, and *Polavision Vignettes*. Music for the Eames Polavision films was later composed by their frequent collaborator, award-winning Hollywood film composer Elmer Bernstein (1922-2004).

The mutual admiration of Edwin Land and the Eameses is apparent. Further, they loved spectacle. The Eameses were also circus enthusiasts. “One of Charles’ most enduring love affairs was with the circus,” notes author Pat Kirkham in *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the 20th Century* (1995). “He was fascinated by the energy, discipline, and spectacle of what he saw as a well-orchestrated ensemble of disparate parts.” In fact, in the mid-1940s, the Eameses were about to audition as a clown act when a timely furniture contract allowed them to continue their design work. Throughout his life, Charles Eames made a point of broadcasting his admiration for the circus arts. In 1948 he began an ambitious project to photograph the performers with Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus during their engagement in Los Angeles. During that visit he became friends with Bill Ballantine, who would go on to become the dean of the Ringling Brothers Clown College in Sarasota, Fla. In 1960 Eames included a juggler in one of his short films, and in 1971 he made training films for the clown college that explored the nature of disguise and transformation that also included juggling.



Charles and Ray Eames made 80 short films, including a series of seven using Polavision, that are available on DVD today (above).



Charles and Ray Eames were central to the development of the design aesthetic that has come to be known as “mid-century modern.”

The husband-and-wife team were best known for their bent plywood furniture, but they were also prolific exhibition designers, multi-media artists, architects, product designers, photographers, mask-makers, and filmmakers.

They were also circus enthusiasts, and once prepared their own clown act to audition for Ringling Brothers. In the 1970s Charles received an honorary degree from Ringling Bros. Clown College after making training films for the school. The Eames aesthetic was evidently shared by Edwin Land, who repeatedly used jugglers to promote Polaroid products.

At left are two of their best-known chair designs.



continued on next page

A juggler on the frontier of the video revolution

continued from previous page

He was named a trustee of the college, and later received an honorary degree. In 1974 Eames presented a paper to the Academy of Arts & Sciences in which he quoted Joseph Needham's *Science & Civilization of China*: "Perhaps the passage of jugglers and acrobats to and fro merits more attention in the history of science than it has yet received. ... For ancient and medieval people there was not much difference between jugglers, alchemists, mechanics, and star clerks – all dealers in magic and glamour."

Edwin Land and his love of spectacle. Edwin Land was known to be a showman of sorts, especially at Polaroid's stockholders meetings. "The meetings were legendary for their spectacle," said Eames' grandson, Eames Demetrios, "in the best sense of the word." Land was an inventor immersed in the science, but his goal with instant photography and instant movies was not to glorify the technology, but to break down the barriers that prevented the photographer from being "one with the scene." He and Eames were "on the same page" about this, and the values Eames presented so well in the promotional film for the SX-70 would be trotted out again to promote Polavision.

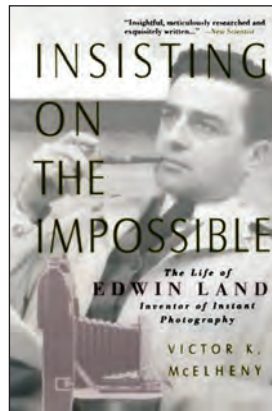
After one early presentation to Polaroid board members to win their enthusiasm for Polavision, Edwin Land took them all to Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace – and gave them all Polavision cameras to film scenes of their choice. Since the day the redeveloped marketplace opened in August 1976 – I was hired as feature entertainment on the opening weekend – "Quincy Market" became known as the mecca for street performance in Boston. There was a steady schedule of colorful and talented performers booked into two-hour time slots by the Rouse Corporation, so it is likely that Land and the Polaroid directors encountered some of the city's finest jugglers and movement artists on their filming excursion.

Land's presentation to rank-and file shareholders in spring 1977 was called by his biographer "the most extravagant of all his public presentations." Land was riding high – just a few months earlier he was inducted

At right is Polaroid founder Edwin Land at a presentation promoting the new Polavision instant home movie system. Land's mantra: "Anything worth doing is worth doing to excess."



At right is the cover of the biography *Insisting on the Impossible: The Life of Edwin Land, Inventor of Instant Photography*, by Victor K. McElheny. The book captures the drive of Edwin Land (1909-1991), and devotes considerable attention to the Polavision project that ultimately sent the Polaroid Corp. into its fatal tailspin.



into the Inventors Hall of Fame – and a *Time* magazine article of May 9, 1977 announced, "At Long Last, Land's Instant Home Movies": "Polaroid Founder-Chairman Edwin Land is a showman who likes to use his corporation's annual meetings to stage splashy demonstrations of the company's latest instant-photography miracles. Last week he had a stunning new one to display: instant movies ... after 30 years of experimenting. So Land put on a show that lived up to his own dry comment: "Anything worth doing is worth doing to excess." Each of the 3,800 shareholders present in Needham, Mass., got a chance to shoot films of jugglers, clowns, and dancing girls, then see the film projected seconds later. Dubbing his new creation Polavision, Land pronounced it 'a new technology to relate ourselves to life and to each other.' He slipped only once, when he tried to insert a film cassette backward into the new system's camera. He fumbled, got it right and bowed to a round of applause."

This background information about Land and the Eameses suggests that the selection of jugglers and pantomimists to promote Polavision was a thread long woven through the Land-Eames aesthetic. At the time, of course, the good news for us performers was that all the checks cleared before Polavision tanked and dragged the corporation down with it. Who could have guessed that a couple of jugglers would be involved in one of the most colossal product failures of the 20th century – and still make money out of the deal!?! (With over 30 years of hindsight, working on the Polavision failure was like showbusiness work in places like Las Vegas or Atlantic City: Sometimes everybody else is losing their shirt after making too many risky bets, and the showbiz acts are the only ones who leave town with any money.)

My Polavision cassette: An obsolete relic of the past ... or a museum piece? Today the Polavision components occasionally turn up on eBay, relics of the past that stir curiosity. About 15 years ago, while cleaning out the glove compartment of our old third-

string car prior to selling it, I discovered a relic of my own, one of the reject cassettes from our 1978 filming – generously gifted to me by the project manager upon completion of our work. I tucked this find away with rows of old audio and video cassettes of our performances, figuring it had probably baked to oblivion in those many years buried in the glove compartment. It sat with the row of other cassettes for another 15 years. When I began tapping my memory for this article, I recalled this glove-compartment relic, located it, and investigated whether any of the baked 33-year-old film image could be digitally reclaimed. A professional in converting analog film to digital media was able to save the entire two minutes and 28 seconds, although the image had deteriorated considerably.

Viewing the DVD at home provided the family with two minutes of amusement. The juggling was hot, clean, and tight, with the exception of the one drop which made the cassette a reject. My wife, L.J. Newton, the fabulous juggler who in 1978 was just about to join me for a 25-year run with our two-person shows, was particularly amused by the ridiculous wardrobe and the frozen-in-place toothy grin. Our son, home from college, laughed out loud, but then muttered something and shook his head ... presumably disapproving of the absence in this long-ago footage of his father's usual on-stage dignity, style, grace, and elegance.

I understand that the Harvard Film Archive, just a stone's throw from the old Polaroid headquarters in Cambridge, Mass., has a place in its collection for Polavision cassettes, several made by artists such as Andy Warhol, Robert Gardner, Stan Brakhage, and Charles and Ray Eames. Unknown to us jugglers back in the 1970s, these and other leading-edge artists were experimenting with, and documenting, the Polavision film technology. One of these days I might stop by the Harvard Film Archive and bestow upon them a copy of my footage from the leading-edge years of instant video. If I ever have any grandchildren, they can take pride in knowing that gramps is in the Harvard Film Archive with Warhol and the Eameses. I'll just have to hope they never go in for a closer look. ■

Below is the former Polaroid Corp. headquarters in Cambridge, Mass. At right is the long-vacant Polaroid building in Waltham.

