

THE JOANNYS SHADOWGRAPHY ARTISTS

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I was fortunate enough to know and meet Jean Drouillard several times while I was developing and touring my own hand shadow act. Jean was the third and final generation of a family dedicated to Shadowgraphy, the art of creating hand shadows. Known and admired throughout Europe, the Joanny family worked together to bring life to numerous characters in their many wonderful and varied shows.

The Drouillard family, under their stage name 'The Joannys', toured Belgium, France and later throughout the rest of Europe and the USA before settling in the town of Cerdanyola del Vallès in Spain in 1920. From there they travelled to London, Paris, Berlin and wherever they were required to perform until they finally left the entertainment world in 1969.

The founder of the Joanny dynasty was Joan Drouillard (1863-1911), born in Thiers, France. According to his grandson Jean, whom I met and interviewed, the family's beginnings were in the circus as jugglers and illusionists under the name 'Milwaukee's'. Joan's son Charles, whose full name was Charles-Adolphe Drouillard Sarg (1886-1976), was born in Glarus, Switzerland, on 25 August 1886 and was the first member of the family to dedicate himself to hand shadows. For more than a decade the Troupe Drouillard worked alongside another family, Professor Burton's troupe, and it was at this time that the 8-year-old Charles saw Chassino give his shadow performance.

Chassino was a well-known Belgian shadow artist, a former pupil and apprentice of the famous 'ombromane' juggler and prestidigitator Felicien Trewey. Jean told me that his father Charles would pick up candles from around the house and rehearse secretly at night, in imitation of his hero Chassino, until one day his father Joan realized that the candles were disappearing too quickly. He guessed that his son Charles would be behind this mystery, and that was how Joan saw Charles one night using his hands to create and project shadows. The next day Joan gave his son a five-franc coin to purchase a more powerful light source and allowed him to debut his shadow entertainment at their very next show.

Charles was already accustomed to going on stage and at just three years old had appeared alongside his parents in the Théâtre de l'Alhambra in Spintay, Belgium, but this was an entirely new experience for him. He had never done anything similar before and did not have much time to prepare, so before the show he worked hard to improve his performance. Jean told me that on the day of his



Charles, María and Jean – The Three Joannys – in action



*Poster for
The Three
Joannys'
colour
shadows*

debut, his father positioned his hands in front of the spotlight but below the level of the screen so he could check the position of his fingers before each silhouette. The show was so well received that step by step Charles was able to perfect his shadow act, which became a regular part of the programme whenever the family performed. In time Charles began to use a magic lantern to project streets, bullfights and other background scenes for the hand shadows. He married María Henuy, born in Liège (Belgium), who learned the secrets and techniques of the shadows and became an essential part of the show. Four hands became six when they were joined by their son Jean (1923-2014), born in Cerdanyola del Vallès. The trio were famous for decades touring the world as 'The Three Joannys', performing in prestigious theatres including the London Coliseum, the Olympia de Paris and the Wintergarten in Berlin.

The Drouillard family was linked to the world of illusionism even before Charles' shadow act. Joan, the founder of 'The Joannys', performed magic tricks in their shows and Charles was a close friend of the illusionist Horace Goldin. When Goldin was appearing in Barcelona in 1933, an entrepreneur from the entertainment world proposed a tour of southern Spain but Goldin agreed only on condition that his friends 'The Three Joannys' accompanied him in the performances and organised the tour. Jean told me that as a child he spent several years in England where they sometimes shared the bill with Goldin. Goldin always asked Jean (the child of the family) to observe his rehearsals. Afterwards he would ask whether he had seen any of the tricks, knowing that children often spot things missed by adults because they look in all the wrong places!

But this was not the family's only connection with magic. In Spain they were accustomed to sharing the stage with illusionists such as José Florences Gili, 'El Gran Florences' (inventor of the electric cigarette effect), Cartex (a Spanish illusionist who they saw debut in La Sala Paladium of Madrid), Li-Chang and illusionist Fred Kaps with whom they collaborated more than once. The last of their shows with Kaps included a street scene with balconies and windows on both sides, the windows providing frames for four screens where the Joannys could show their shadow figures.



Advertising postcards for Charles (left) and Jean (right)

The Joannys were great innovators in the world of shadow projections. In the Spanish prestidigitation yearbook *Anuario Español de Prestidigitación* from 1942, Javier de Areny-Plandolit wrote about Charles' use of prisms to add rainbow effects and the invention of a powerful arc light greater than 5,000 lumens which could fit into the palm of one hand. For fun, they used this light to project shadows onto a swirling fog one night in Cerdanyola. They even invented 3-D anaglyph shadows for which the audience had to wear the classic glasses with red and blue filters. According to Jean, the patent was sold to a company in the USA for 500 dollars. For a while they also used white shadows (coptographical images) but took these out of their repertoire because they could not create much excitement with their audiences. Jean even mentioned an apparatus that they created to make shadows using X-rays without emitting any radiation, though he never explained how this would have been achieved.

Their show lasted about 14 minutes and was varied according to the tastes of the public, but their main specialism was always hand shadows (*ombromanies*). After an introduction they called 'simple shadows' they continued with some pantomimes using projected background slides to create the 'sets'. Perhaps the most popular of

these was 'the bullfight', but they took a particular pride in showing 'the Indian'. This required all six hands working together and Charles would keep the thumbnail of his right hand a little longer to represent the eyelid of the Indian, allowing the noble figure to open and close his eyes at will.

The last performance of these great artists was in 1969 in the party room Isla Blanca on Ibiza. Jean was a very kind person and I was fortunate to meet him on several occasions. He liked to share memories and anecdotes of his years as a shadow artist. For me it was a great honour to spend time with him, and to learn about and share his passion for shadows.

Images and photos from the Sergi Arnalot collection



The Three Joannys performing one of their most celebrated shadows – 'the Indian' (above). Advertisement for The Three Joannys' colour shadows (right)

