

Film Guide *for* YOYO Man

Nemo Concepcion The YoYo Man

I fell under the yoyo's spell on the first really hot day of Spring in the endless year of fifth grade. A yoyo demonstrator appeared unheralded at the corner of the playground. "Spinner," he announced as the yoyo flew from his hand to sleep at his feet. "Around the World," it whizzed through a 360 degree arc. "Walk the Dog," and the yoyo bounced along the blacktop as he minced behind it like a man walking a miniature poodle. This shopworn man of foreign men brought magic to that hot and tired playground. His unexpected arrival suggested a nomadic life, and the wary eye he cast about for teachers who would throw him out let us know that he was offering exotic knowledge.

He stayed twenty minutes; told everyone to buy a Duncan yoyo at the Five-and-Ten and meet him there next Saturday for a yoyo contest. You had to have a Duncan yoyo to enter. Before he left, he passed out a few yoyos to start momentum. I was handed a green one with a row of rhinestones across the center. Today that yoyo would be worth over \$100; this was 1956, I was ten and no one dreamed of an age without rhinestone flashed wooden yoyos. I wore out three strings and practiced until my finger was stiff and swollen. I didn't even place in the contest.

The yoyo dominated my spare time until school was out, then it joined other past fancies in the closet. The next Spring I waited, but he didn't come back. I guess I've been waiting ever since for the yoyo man to come back.

He became a personal totem of an America just out of reach, real but beyond my experience. The temper of the generation ahead of us lives on in our unconscious, part of a collective memory. The Great Depression and World War II were over before I was born, but they are real in a way that the Civil War and the Roaring Twenties are not. I contrast freeways and jet airplanes with dirt roads and the golden age of railroads as if I had equal experience with both. The yoyo man, as he receded into memory, became a visceral tie to the prim of my grand-

parents and the youth of my parents.

Twenty years later, on a sweltering Fourth of July, I was shooting videotape for the Smithsonian Institution Festival of American Folklife. That morning I had interviewed a traditional Chinese kitemaker from San Francisco who had realized a longtime ambition to fly one of her kites from the Great Wall of China and who was hoping to fly one from atop the Washington Monument, thereby making a personal bridge of her two cultures. It seems that Americans are forever working out, often at a subliminal level, where they came from and to what in their ancestors they owe their present strengths and weaknesses. In the afternoon I was scheduled to tape a Portuguese festa adapted from a dairymen's festival in the Azores by immigrants who had set up dairies in California. As the organizer pointed out, it was a success in the Azores to have three cows. In America, he would be very small if he only had forty cows.

As I walked across the festival grounds, I heard, "And now this is my version of reaching for the moon with two yoyos." Nemo Concepcion was holding a score of children spellbound with his virtuosity and fluid banter, much as my friends and I had been captivated many years before.

Nemo was not the same yoyo man. He was fastidiously dressed in a blue suit, bright orange shirt and white tie secured with a tennis racket tie tack. Everything about him was formal, dignified and elegant. He performed with the assurance that only very old performers possess. Although some of the power and flash is gone, you still sense it in the transcendent ease with which they execute impossible moves.

Mr. Concepcion and I talked many times that week. He explained that like himself, the yoyo came from the Philippines. "The original yoyo was very sharp, you could use it as a weapon. With the distance of four or five feet I could hit your head. Years, centuries ago, it used to be a weapon of the natives of the Philippines. From a weapon of war to a children's toy." He smiled at the last line. A Duncan copywriter concocted the phrase and it has appeared in every newspaper write-up about yoyo men ever since.

To demonstrate that the yoyo could indeed be an effective weapon, he asked me to light a cigar. When the ash reached a respectable length, he backed away a few paces, whipped his yoyo through three preliminary loops and knocked off the ash. He said he never does that trick for children because smoking is not good to show them.

Directed by John Melville Bishop
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According to authority George Malko, the yoyo originated many times in the course of human history. There is evidence of a version in ancient Greece and again in the court of Louis XVII. But these were simple up and down versions. The slip string that lets the yoyo sleep at the bottom was a Filipino innovation. Dr. Mellie Lopez, a Filipino folklorist, reports that children there hold contests with these spinning yoyos to see which one could do the most elaborate loops before the spin runs out.

Pedro Flores is credited with bringing the trick yoyo to the United States. According to Nemo, he was making yoyos and selling them on the West Coast in 1926. Donald Duncan saw his demonstration and sensed a marketing opportunity. He bought the rights and hired Pedro Flores to promote it. The yoyo as we know it today, with the virtuoso repertoire of tricks, is a result of the merger of a traditional Filipino toy with a uniquely American approach to marketing and promotion. Working from the basic tricks of Pedro Flores and other Filipino demonstrators, Duncan renamed the movements and honed the banter so that the tricks became a show. Nemo and his brother Regal Concepcion were among the first of these demonstrators. Nemo says he invented some of the tricks himself, but in the give and take of the demonstration, the repertoire came to be pretty much shared, with each demonstrator adding his personal coloration and special tricks.

Nemo described a carefully choreographed campaign of visiting schools and shopping centers, followed by yoyo contests, which sold an incredible number of yoyos. "In one city we sell at least fifty or a hundred thousand." It was all personal contact; tell the kids where to buy the yoyos, work behind the scenes to make sure they are in the stores, and then hold contests.

Periodicity is an important element in children's pastimes and games. Jacks are big for a few weeks, then marbles, next hopscotch, or tops. Occasionally something new appears like hula hoops, frisbees, or skateboards. The cycle follows a pre-adolescent calendar beyond adult perception. One day the marbles are on the shelf, the next those marbles are the center of the universe, and with no warning they are once more relegated to the shelf. The cycles are such that in the ages between 8 and 12, a child will embrace each pastime several times, generally being better at it each time.

Donald Duncan capitalized on this periodicity. The coming of the yoyo man always starts the fad again, because children are always ready to take up something new. The yoyo man, though initiated and sustained as a mercantile venture, became an integral part of American children's folklore. The Duncan Company went out of business for several years in the 1960's after they began advertising on television. The medium sold yoyos too well. The whole country wanted them at once and the company couldn't meet the demand. Just as quickly, the whole country lost interest and the warehouses were full of unwanted yoyos. As long as the company plays its role as part of tradition, the company thrives.

Nemo says that children must be at least ten years old before they are strong enough to put the proper spin on the yoyo. The best age is around fourteen when they have the physical strength and coordina-

tion to do the tricks, and are still young enough to be enthused by a toy. Watching Nemo with children, I was struck with the amount of attention he gives to the strings. They have to be the right length for a child's height, so they don't touch the ground when held at arm length. The string has to be loose for tricks involving lot of spin and tighter for looping. In a demonstration he uses several yoyos, each tuned for particular types of tricks. And as he works he frequently intersperses Loop the Loops which tighten the string or Sleeping Beauties which loosen the string.

As in many children's skills and activities, there is a progression of yoyo tricks from simple ones that anybody can master, to very complex. This is true for jacks, hopscotch, tumbling, diving, frisbee and skateboards. There is no improvisation in how you learn the skill. You start with the basic trick and work through increasing levels of difficulty until you run out of steam. There is satisfaction and accomplishment from the start, and always a further challenge when you want it. You are not expected to create on the yoyo, only master the next trick in imitation of more skilled peers.

Nemo always teaches the Spinner first, since it is the building block of all the other tricks. He tells them that you must throw down with the arm and wrist straight. Other than this, he teaches like all folk craftsmen, showing the trick over and over again, and being very encouraging.

His formal demonstration always starts with the same three tricks: The Spinner, which is the Around the World, and Walk the Dog. After that it is improvised. Nemo might do a series like Spank the Baby, Pinch the Baby, Tickle the Baby, and once it is crying, end up with the classic Rock the Baby where his hands make a string cradle and the yoyo rocks back and forth. Or he might do one of his inventions like the Suicide Trick where he wraps the string over his neck, then snaps the yoyo back, all the while cautioning you not to try it. Or he might do a cat's cradle variation like the Texas Lone Star where his fingers make a five pointed star with the string while the yoyo spins below.

Much of Nemo's charm is in the fluidity and timing of his banter, as in his coloration of a familiar trick like Around the Corner where the string is placed over the shoulder and the yoyo flips back to the front. Nemo introduces this as "The Betty Grable Special – come up and see me sometime." It might well have started as the Mae West Special, but Nemo shifted allegiances far back. Often the trick itself is not as difficult as timing the narration such as the Spaghetti Trick; the string is bunched up while saying "The Italian Spaghetti" – and the folded string and spinning yoyo held out and kissed – "with the meat ball. Mmm, good," as he mimes taking a bite.

Once the show is under way, some of the more complicated tricks, like the combination of loops that make up the Roller Coaster, or those involving two yoyos like Milking the Cow, are brought into play. Nemo used to Milk the Cow with four yoyos, two on each hand, but he is no longer strong enough.

The demonstration always ends with the Bye Bye Trick. From a strong Spinner, Nemo takes the string off his finger and throws the spinning yoyo high in the air and catches it in his jacket pocket.

“Don’t expect to learn this overnight,” he told me. “It takes practice, a correct practice. You have to have an allowance to your movement. Put it in art, in the art. Your total body’s involved.” Watching him, you can see what he means. Although the deftness is in his arm and hands, he has perfect control of the position of his feet and body. Sometimes he accents the force of his throw with a small kick. He crouches, bends, and turns with each trick, always making sure that the whole audience can see.

“The spinning is the real foundation of the tricks. Spin it good; if the string does not tangle, it’s a good trick. And you got to be quick. All these tricks are controlled with the speed. Speed and very smooth, not jerking. The yoyo is kind of a delicate toy. Once you jerk, it’s coming back right away and you cannot make the trick.”

The more I heard the more I came to feel that his was a uniquely American experience. Yoyo men are themselves role models of personal achievement through hard work, perseverance, and personal flair. These are basic American virtues; we respect above all the hard worker with a flash of inspiration.

In learning the yoyo, you do two things. You acquire a manipulative skill which is a source of personal pride and an object of peer approval, if not admiration. But more importantly, you test yourself, first against an abstract skill, and secondly against a peer group. You test how good you really are as well as how good you can make others think you are.

Nemo Concepcion did not come from our culture, yet his story is uniquely American. He was born in Ilocano on a small farm on the island of Luzon. His older brother went to the United States to get an education. Nemo agreed to help put his brother through college in return for passage to America. After earning a Ph.D. from Cornell, the brother went back to the Philippines to teach. The course of Nemo’s life was not as smooth.

“I make the trip to USA in 1923. I was only a high school kid. I took up civil service in the U.S. Post Office at Chicago, and that was where I was employed during my high school days. I did not have to become a citizen because at that time the Philippine Islands was a possession of the United States. It says in my passport: a citizen of the Philippine Islands owing allegiance to the United States. We were enjoying the privileges of an American citizen as long as we were under the American flag.”

“I was going to go to college when I finished high school, but then the deadly Depression came in. The Salvation Army were feeding up those who need to eat. I went there to eat twice a day. They give you food at ten o’clock, and then at four o’clock they give you the combination lunch and dinner. I survived. But the greatest thing that saved me was the Duncan yoyo.”

“In 1932 I met Pedro Flores. He said, ‘Come here, you look like a gentleman, you dress up all the time, you must be something.’ So he brought me to the Duncan office, but the manager did not qualify me. You have to do plenty of tricks to qualify yourself to be a demonstrator.”

Nemo went back to his room and practiced, determined to become a demonstrator. Two weeks later he returned to the Duncan office, and they signed him up.

“The pay was very low at that Depression time, \$15 a week. But it saved me from the Salvation Army, from the starvation line. I was so happy; I was praising God. That’s the time when I had only one suit and one shirt. Later I had to buy more; you had to be presentable to put on the demonstration. You have to dress up because you are always in public, wear a tie and all that. It’s kind of an actor’s job.”

Nemo continued with the demonstration until the outbreak of World War II when the company stopped making yoyos. He joined the army and served in the transport division until the end of the war. In 1946 the demonstrations were revived.

In 1950, the first International yoyo contest was held in Washington, D.C. Nemo worked his way through the preliminary heats until he found himself tied with a sixteen year old boy. They were matched trick for trick, and Nemo needed something special to go over the top. He had been working on a new routine, and decided to try it. The band played “Begin the Beguine” and he yoyoed to the musical beat. That won the applause of the audience and the trophy for Nemo. Two years later, he retired from professional yoyo demonstrating, although he still performs for the children in his Los Angeles neighborhood.

“I criss-crossed the United States about 300 times demonstrating the yoyo. I’m talking about before freeways and turnpikes. It’s hard to drive those narrow roads. I was getting tired. I told Mr. Duncan -- I’ll take the long vacation.”

Nemo tried a variety of jobs and when I filmed him at 77, he was teaching tennis. He remains as vital and optimistic as I imagine he was the day he left Manila. I asked if he had any final advice to improve my yoyo, and he offered a more general philosophy.

“The only advice is practice, correct practice and determination. Nobody told me to go ahead; I saw the big opportunity, I had the determination. Just like coming here. I told my folks that if you have no determination to see the United States, don’t do it. You got to be brave, full of courage. If you are afraid, it’s not good. It’s the same thing with the yoyo.”

Reference

THE ONE AND ONLY YOYO BOOK, George Malko, New York: Avon Books, 1978.