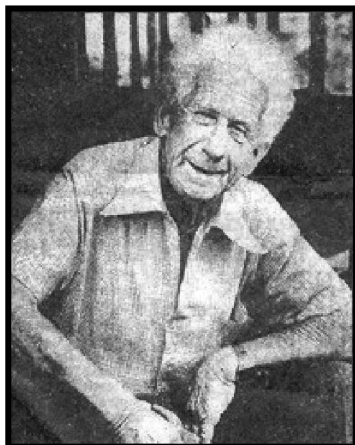


Russell Middlebrook

7 April 1908 -- 9 October 1999



Charles Russell Middlebrook was born on 7 April 1908, youngest son of John Thompson Middlebrook and Julia Ann (b. Bartle). John was a carpenter based in Matakoho for some time at the turn of the century and Russell was born in the Bay of Islands (possibly why he was named Russell). He was the youngest of 4 siblings; Farrer, Eva and Nelson.

At the age of 7 he took up acrobatics which led him into the world of Pantomime. As a young man in Auckland he performed with a team called the *Herculean Hand Balancers*. Unable to join WW2 due to deafness, he became a member of the *Arcadians Troup* which included accordionist Toni Savage, entertaining American and New Zealand troops in Auckland camp shows. Commemorative medals from the forces were among his souvenirs of those days.

He left for Australia in 1949 and worked in nightclubs, circus and on ice with an American production. In Queensland he was on the same bill as Peter Newberry. He spent time performing with *Worth's Circus* and *Sole Brothers Circus*. In New Zealand later in life he travelled with *Whirling Brothers Circus* and the *Robinson Family Circus*. There was also a trip to New Caledonia for night club performances. Returning to New Zealand in 1960 he worked with *Fullers Entertainment Agency* when George Tollerton was manager.



Agent Mary Throll remembers, 'He had an outstanding act, a real crowd pleaser and he brought the house down. He would wear about 20 different waistcoats and he would take them all off during the performance. And as Mademoiselle Fifi he would swap the waistcoats for a dress. Mr Middlebrook was known for his feats of balance. He would balance on his hands on a stack of chairs, with the chairs balancing on beer bottles.'

He was a trick cyclist, acrobat and clown who made many of his own props. One bicycle was nearly 2m high and one fell apart. His saucy 'Madame Fifi' and slapstick 'Byko' were silent clowns.

By trade, Russell was a plasterer. At age 16 he had attended *Elam School of Fine Arts* and later worked on parts of the *Civic Theatre* and the *Auckland War Memorial Museum*. He had a passion for sculpting and assisted Richard Gross who has several sculptures at the *Auckland Domain*. One was a bronze figure, The Athlete, unveiled in 1936 at the Domain gates which attracted some public criticism because it was considered offensive. Some of his own sculptures are on display at the *Auckland War Memorial Museum*. He was also a very good photographer.



Russell married in 1971 but his wife Pat died of cancer in 1976. Jon Zealando remembers that Russell had an operation which partly corrected his hearing for a while. 'He was taken aback by the applause, he'd never really noticed it before.'

Russell helped many community organisations to raise funds for charity. He spent his lifetime entertaining and was still performing at 87, although he had to give up his trick cycling routine because of arthritis in his knees. He received a *Scroll of Honour* from the *Variety Artists Club* in 1973 and was granted the *Benny* in 1983. Russell would attend every *VAC AGM* and I can remember him sleeping through most of them. I guess he couldn't hear much of what was going on. I also recall

his goldfish routine in *Robinson's Circus* with lots of splashing and carrot fish being eaten and offered to the audience!

Russell passed away on 9 Oct 1999 in Auckland. He was 91.