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Maria Kempinska

Founder of Jongleurs

The first time that Maria Kempinska put on a show was at her all-girls convent school during Lent to raise money for charity. It was an unlikely debut into show business but it clearly stood her in good stead. When she sold her chain of Jongleurs comedy clubs a few years ago she received a cheque for £8.5 million.

Brought up by Polish refugee parents on a council estate outside Watford, Kempinska did a lot of voluntary work at the local mental hospital while at school. By the time she left she had set her heart on pursuing a career in psychiatry. But her father refused to allow it, believing that she was too young to deal with such a difficult subject, so she decided to train as a teacher instead. She soon realised she did not want to be part of the school system, however, and started teaching drama in play centres and youth clubs instead.

Kempinska drifted through a series of jobs until in the early 1980s at the age of 23 she was hired to promote a poet who was performing at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It was the first time she had been to the festival and she loved



it. More than that, though, it proved to be just the inspiration she needed.

She says: 'I decided that what London needed was a platform for young new talent like they had in Edinburgh.'

She returned to London full of enthusiasm and started looking around for a possible venue for her club where comedians, poets and musicians could perform. Then she remembered an enormous room above a pub in Battersea, south London, where she used to go roller-skating. After persuading the owners to let her use it on a Friday night she talked her bank into giving her a £300 overdraft. Then she started looking for unknown, but talented, performers to appear on stage each week.

'I had very little idea about business', she says. 'But I thought that if the club didn't work and the bank came after me for money then I could sell my bike and pay them back £5 a week.'

She had planned to run the club in partnership with two friends but when they pulled out she decided to go ahead

anyway. She says: 'It was the first time I had done something for myself but I decided I had nothing to lose and so I should just do it.'

She decided to call her club *Jongleurs*, a medieval term for a wandering minstrel. 'I chose a difficult name because my own name is difficult and once people know it, they don't forget it', says Kempinska. 'So I thought that people wouldn't forget the name *Jongleurs* that easily.'

It worked. She says: 'The first two Fridays were absolutely packed, and by the fourth week I was getting calls from people asking if they could perform at the club.'

There were, however, a few early adjustments to be made. Kempinska's original plan was to have performers of all kinds on stage, but she quickly decided to focus on stand-up comedians after realising there were not enough other types of performers to choose from.

She started running shows on Saturday nights as well and after six months felt confident enough to give up her day job as an assistant to an actors' agent. A business partner, John Davy, joined the company in 1986 and the two of them ran the shows in Battersea for eight years. It provided a platform for dozens of comedians who have since become household names, such as Arthur Smith, Paul Merton and Mike Myers.

But Kempinska was wary of relying on talent alone. She says: 'I didn't ever want to rely on a performer to spread the word. The venue itself had to be good enough so people would have a good evening's entertainment – and if they saw somebody who eventually became famous it would be a bonus.'

In 1990 she and Davy formed a partnership with Regent Inns, the company that owned the Battersea venue, splitting all the profits made from the venue equally between them, while Kempinska retained the *Jongleurs* name.

The partnership went so well that they opened a second Jongleurs in Camden, north London. They also decided to open six further venues across the country, with Regent Inns putting up all the money to create purpose-built venues with a bar and Kempinska running the comedy club upstairs. She also decided to provide food and a disco after each show.

‘When working people go out on a Friday or Saturday night they don’t want to go to a room at the top of a scruffy pub which is unkempt and uncared for’, she explains. ‘They want to go to a place where they feel that they are getting an evening out and having a good time.’

When Jongleurs had amassed eight venues the joint venture was put up for sale. It received a couple of offers but in the end Regent Inns itself decided to buy it, giving Kempinska and Davy £8.5 million for their share. Kempinska retains ownership of the Jongleurs name, which she leases to Regent Inns in perpetuity, and has also stayed on as

Fact File

Date of birth: 3 May 1953

Marital status: divorced with two children

Highest level of education achieved: university

Qualifications: five O levels, teaching certificate in English and drama, MA in Psychotherapy

Interests: reading, music, opera, theatre, friends and her children

Personal philosophy: ‘Find the right shoes to walk in for each occasion and strut your stuff.’

creative director with a contract to provide bookings for all the venues. Using the skills she learnt from running Jongleurs, Kempinska has also started a new music management company called Lockout which includes live shows, television and publishing and recording artists such as Mamas Gun and Sam Heard.

Now 55, she thinks the reason for her success has been her attention to detail: 'The secret is to know what you are there for – and then to do what you do extremely well. It is no good having a venue where the sound is bad and saying you will deal with it next week. You have to deal with it there and then. It is about being the best you can. Do what you want to do, but do it absolutely brilliantly – and do it now.'