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NEWS & COLUMNS

The Magic Hustle Working the room with New York's new breed of professional tricksters.

By Logan Hill

The Magic Hustle

After a sold-out performance of *Monday Night Magic*, the dapper pick pocket and close-up magician Michael Chaut changes out of a slick suit and into some jeans and heads to the bar. He's joined by his partner, the imperious sleight-of-hand artist Jamy Ian Swiss, rings specialist David Oliver, magician Jeff Moche, the disheveled carnie Doc Swan, a few groupies and a juggler. Still, Chaut has his eyes on another guest—Emily, a blonde socialite who may hire him to work a Park Ave. party.

"Let me show you something," Chaut says, grabbing Emily's hand as he settles at the bar. He asks her to sign a card. A few feints and ruffles later, he promises to reveal Emily's signed card by throwing the deck skyward and plucking it from the air. "This is a miracle of a semi-religious nature," he intones, binding the cards with a rubber band, "and I say semireligious because when I do this trick, people say *Oh...my...God.*"

Chaut throws the deck of cards up toward the ceiling, then catches it intact. "Is this your card?" Chaut asks, pulling one out.

"No," says Emily.

"Oh." Chaut frowns. "Is this? Is this?" Fanning out the deck of cards. "Is this? I must have messed up. Unless..."

Chaut points upward: The card, with Emily's name, is stuck to the ceiling—one in a constellation of cards plastered to the green tin roof of the bar, each signed with a different mark's name. This one gasps.

"I've got to book you for my benefit," she squeals. Chaut produces another card: his business card. He's hired.

"Oh, sit down," groans Swiss, a goateed veteran and exacting critic who's seen—and performed—versions of the Card on the Ceiling hundreds of times. The trick's a classic, he says, first written about in 1712 and performed in myriad variations ever since: first as a royal entertainment, later as a bar trick during prohibition, now as a party showstopper. Chaut learned it on the job at an Aspen ski resort and has used it at weddings, trade shows, bar and bat mitzvahs and product launches. Swiss learned it hustling a Maryland magic bar for tips, but that's another story.

"Michael, I'm starving!" Swiss complains. "Save the cards for later."

So Chaut joins Swiss and the others around a roughshod wood table where they sip domestics, gossip about a Boston sales convention that might be hiring and lament the futility of trying to pick up women with magic.

"Yeah, I've got that one trick that wins over the women," says Moche.

"But does it work?" Swiss asks.

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"Of course not," says Moche.

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"Women just don't like card guys," Swiss grumbles. "They just don't like cards."

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"I don't know what it is," says Moche.

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"I know what it is—it's Todd," says Chaut, referring to his other partner, Todd Robbins, a former Big Apple Circus ringleader, part-time Woody Allen jazz band sideman and the current impresario of the Coney Island sideshows. "Sometimes, you're in a bar and you're doing some tricks and the girls are all around you," says Chaut, shuffling an imaginary deck, "then Todd comes in."

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"Todd's pick-up line is, 'Hey darling, pick a lamp'," Swiss explains. "Then he walks over to the lamp, unscrews a lightbulb and eats it. No magic. He just eats it. And, man, *nobody's* gonna be amazed that you produced their card after that."

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"And he's *married*," complains Chaut. "Why not me?"

"Well, the ladies just love carnies," says the sword-swallowing, fire-eating Doc Swan. "You wanna know what the secret is?" Everyone leans closer. "It's the freak thing," he explains, in a hushed, satisfied southern drawl. "They know you're different, but they all wanna know if *it*, you know, is normal too." He glances down at his crotch. "And, I tell them, 'Sure, the *middle* one is...'"

And everyone at the table cackles like a studio audience. If anyone can appreciate a well-worn punch line, it's a working magician.

Despite the cynics who think Siegfried and Roy, hairspray and the word "creepy" sum up the contemporary state of magic, illusion is very much alive in New York City—from the spectacles of David Blaine and Ricky Jay to the lucrative cons of celebrity psychics. New York's Society of American Magicians celebrated its centennial last summer, and Tannen's Magic Shop just marked its 40th anniversary. Chaut, Robbins, Swiss and their production company, Magical Nights Inc., are at the forefront of trying to keep another generation of working magicians employed and in front of New York audiences.

Chaut, formerly an insurance salesman who would pick pockets and perform card tricks on cruise ships to pay for his vacations, founded *Monday Night Magic* in 1997 to produce an after-dinner magic show. With the help of magicians Frank Brents, Peter Samelson, Swiss and Robbins, the company has become a virtual CAA for the city's prestidigitators, booking high-end corporate and private work up and down the East Coast. The company produces the labor-of-love stage show *Monday Night Magic*, now the city's longest-running off-Broadway magic production and a stopover for the world's itinerant magicians, from card-cheat Simon Lovell to the menacing mentalist Max Maven. Recently, the company has expanded its empire, with Swiss' stunning after-dinner show *Magic: Close-Up in Concert* at the Rainbow Room, *Sideshow Saturday Night*, a sharp new carnival revue emceed by Robbins at Soho Playhouse and a weekend series of *Magic Matinee* performances for kids. The conjurers, carnies and card wizards of Magical Nights are some of the most astounding and amazing in the business, but as any one of their colleagues will tell you, their most amazing feat is just making a living.

Once supported by kings, queens, vaudeville and Ed Sullivan, magicians have turned to corporate America. "The trade show or the convention floor has taken the place of the old variety theaters and variety arts shows," says Swiss, a *Genii* magazine columnist who's become the must-read, must-fear Michiko Kakutani of magic publishing. "Where else can magicians pick up a regular paycheck? Of course, the weird thing is, nobody's ever coming there because they want to see you. You're only there because some events planner booked you."

That's why, Swiss says, Magical Nights can pay top-notch magicians "a pittance" to perform at *Monday Night Magic*. "We pay guys almost nothing, and we lose money on the show every year," says Swiss. "But for the chance to do your thing in front of people who actually want to see you, a lot of us would work for nothing."

He pauses. "Well, almost nothing."

The company's *Monday Night Magic* show barely breaks even, but that's to be expected. In a sense, it's a classic act of misdirection. "Personally, we do the show because we love to perform magic," says Chaut. "But business-wise, now it really works like a marketing vehicle."

Performers consider the show an audition for lucrative corporate work, because Chaut distributes free show tickets to events planners, sales reps and booking agents. Apparently, the approach is working. According to clients who have booked Magical Nights recently, the firm's top talents charge as much as \$5000 for a night of stage work and \$10,000 for a full day at a trade show.

"We're not the guys who do balloon animals," Chaut jokes. "The other day, this nice lady called me up and said, 'What can you do for two hundred bucks?' And I said, 'I can find you a clown in a wig!' I told her, unless you want some semipro kid, to get a professional magician for your five-year-old for 45 minutes in New York is gonna be at least 500 bucks."

It's a strange profession where not doing balloon animals gives you a certain sort of street cred, but the Magical Nights crew prides itself on professionalism.

"I hate all those stories about nerds sitting in the back of some restaurant trading tricks all weekend long," gripes Swiss. "Real magicians don't have time for that crap. On weekends, we have to work."

On the Thursday of a typical workweek, Michael Chaut walks carefully down a wobbly pier toward a private yacht-warming party at Chelsea Piers. "Most people starting out, they think you've got to know dozens of tricks before you can start working," he says. "The thing is, some guys can use just five to ten tricks and work forever."

Typically, Chaut usually uses just five to seven on any given night, tailoring his material to the event. Tonight, in the cramped quarters of the cabin, Chaut sticks to simple stuff, picking pockets and producing cards as the boat rocks against the pier and guests juggle cocktails.

"One golden rule: Never hit on the guests," he says, as he sips a Diet Coke, noting that he never drinks on the job, either. "You want to ruin your reputation? Have a guest go back to the host and say, 'That sleazy magician you had was all over me!'"

So Chaut involves reticent husbands in the tricks to put them at ease, whispering into the men's ears, "I'm going to steal her watch so don't hit me, okay?" After each trick, he hands out a business card and a flyer for *Monday Night Magic*. When he quickly discovers that a guest books country clubs in the Hamptons, he corners her.

"I had a magician working for me before," she says skeptically, "but he was, well, a real dork."

"Well, let me show you one more," says Chaut, winding up for the Card on the Ceiling. The ceilings are so low that Chaut has to take a knee on the floor, her humble suitor. "...and I say semi-religious because when people see this trick they say *Oh...my...God...*"

Impressed, the agent produces her own card. "Call me," she says, smiling as her manicured nails finger Chaut's crisp lapels.

Over the course of the next six days, a normal work week for Chaut, he performs at four weddings at the Livingston, NJ, wedding facility the Crystal Plaza, a business association luncheon at Tavern on the Green, a benefit at Cipriani's, a fortieth birthday party in Queens, a Go-Card.com corporate event, a 21st birthday party on the Upper East Side and a bar mitzvah in Brooklyn. During the day, he entertains two visiting magicians and a mind reader— itinerant vaudevillians who crash at his apartment.

All week long, Chaut unscrews the inscrutable and caps every little miracle with a pragmatic twist on The Miser's Dream. Only, instead of producing an endless stream of coins from behind his ear, he deals out an improbable number of fliers and business cards from his pockets. Chaut confides that he personally handed out 10,000 business cards in 2002, and he's still rolling the following Thursday, dealing business cards to nearly 150 Liberty Travel agents at a Club Med event at Monkey Bar. An hour into the open bar, flush-faced agents with dark, leathery vacation tans forget which card they picked, as Chaut shouts his patter over the chatter and the piano player, again and again, until he's practically hoarse.

"...and I say semi-religious because when I do this trick people say *Oh...my...God...*"

A bleary-eyed travel agent reels against the bar. "That's not religious! That's evil!" He screeches to his friend, "Damn! This guy is, like...the best musician I've ever seen—"

"You just said *musician*," his friend corrects him. "He's a *magician*."

"Honey, I've had, like, fifteen cosmos on the house and I don't give a fuck what he is."

Unruffled, Chaut reshuffles his deck and moves onto the next couple.

"That's just part of the job," says Chaut after the party, delinting his suit with a roller he keeps in the trunk of his car. "You just try to win them over anyway."

It's going to be a long night of spilled drinks, a missing magic pen and several dozen people who ask, "Do you know David Blaine?" Late that night, at a Gramercy housewarming party for a real estate scion, Chaut gets cornered by a drunk CPA who thinks "Dude, can you turn my girlfriend's B cups into C cups?" is an original line.

"That's a good one," Chaut says, unperturbed, and, weirdly enough, still not irritable at 2 a.m. after nearly six hours on the job. "Have you seen this?"

Chaut kicks into his spiel.

"...and I say semi-religious..."

Two summers ago, the lightbulb-munching heartthrob Todd Robbins married his wife on the stage of *Monday Night Magic*. In lieu of a minister, Penn & Teller presided, magic fan Robin Leach toasted to "champagne wishes and caviar dreams" and a crew of strippers, contortionists and sword-swallowers consecrated the ceremony. But Robbins, his lanky six-foot-four frame squeezed into an aluminum chair at a Times Square diner, turns melancholic as he describes the bacchanal.

"The best thing was that Melvin Burkhart made it," Robbins adds, explaining that the old carnie was 94 at the time. "He invented the human blockhead—not the stunt, but the act, you see—and he did it for more than sixty years."

Robbins and Burkhart had become good friends. Burkhart taught Robbins dice tricks and hooked him with the sort of "old-timer" stories Robbins loves to repeat. "As it turns out, Melvin's last performance was at my wedding," Robbins says. "Last year, we had a ceremony and scattered his ashes off the pier at Coney Island."

Burkhart ended up like most traveling performers. He lived out his remaining years "on social security in a mobile home down in Florida where a lot of the old-timers live," Robbins explains. "Every once in a while, I'd send him something, or somebody else would send him a little something, and he got by."

It's the kind of retirement that most working magicians have come to expect, but that the Magical Nights production company might help Robbins and his friends avoid. Thanks to the company's bookings, Robbins has been working the college circuit, lucrative corporate gigs and even hitting a few television shows on top of his regular Saturday night show at the Soho Playhouse. Still, he doesn't exactly have a 401k.

"Ward Hall, who runs the last permanent traveling sideshow, was just on his 27th annual retirement tour, and he likes to say, 'Though I have retired, the bill collector has not.'" Robbins chuckles. "You see, an old-timer once told me, 'You grew up with three hots and a cot,' which means that I grew up middle-class in Southern California with three hot meals and a place to sleep. So I'm different from most of the guys who've done this before me—I grew up in a nice, clean, safe, *boring* community and I wanted to experience something extraordinary. Then

one day a sideshow came through town..."

He grins. "So whatever comes, I'm happy I chose what I did."

Robbins is considering taking a sideshow on the road this summer, though he gripes that festival owners now take fifty percent of the cut, after charging extra for electricity and water.

"We're getting a lot more work these days that those old-timers couldn't get, but every showman ends up broke at some time," he says. "As another old-timer once told me, 'I've been broke many times, but I've never been poor.'"

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