



Do You Believe in Magic?

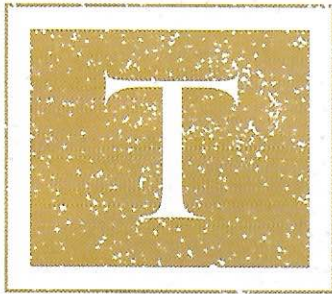
LAWRENCE HASS

brings the art and philosophy of

MAGIC

to Memphis.

by SAMUEL X. CICCI | *photographs by* BRANDON DILL



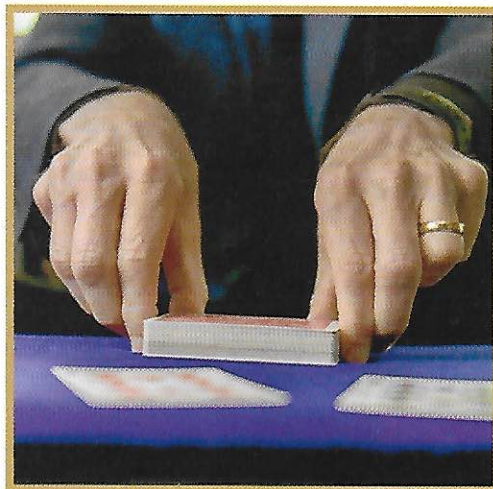
THE FIRST CARD FROM THE TOP OF THE DECK WAS THE TEN OF diamonds. Lawrence Hass promised that he would draw the rest of the tens and cut the deck several times. Next out came the ten of spades. Several cuts later, and the ten of hearts sat on the table. He had me cut the deck myself, and then he pulled a card off the top. “S,” he began, and tossed the card aside. “A,” he continued, discarding another. “M,” he said, finishing my name and putting the third card down. Hass pulled a fourth card off the top of the deck and flipped it to show me. Ten of hearts.

The card demonstration is one of Hass’ warm-up exercises before a show. A deck of cards, or “the magician’s friend,” as he refers to it, is never far from his person. A useful tool when Hass performs close-up magic, which are tricks designed for a more intimate setting. “It’s magic right there, where there’s no screens, no cameras,” he explains. “You’re right on top of it. I’m hired to do private parties, where I’ll go into people’s homes and perform close-up magic after their dinner.”

Hass, however, isn’t limited to small gatherings. After a two-week stint in Las Vegas, he’s set to perform for a fundraiser at Beth Sholom Synagogue. The stage show is a different kind of spectacle, with Hass entertaining several hundred people as opposed to a small crowd. He relishes the variety and looks to make each performance something special. “When I build a magic show, it’s designed to take the audience on a ride and tell a whole story, from the beginning to the end,” he says. “So the opening of the show

engages people and brings them into the magical world.”

Hass has been in Memphis for a little over a year. His wife, Marjorie, was selected as the new president of Rhodes



College, so the two and their dog, Biscuit, moved to Tennessee from Sherman, Texas. So far, he’s adjusting well to the city, both personally and professionally. Some magic students who learned he’d be living in Shelby County contacted him to request private lessons. He and the Orpheum Theatre Group recently finished planning a program for next fall in which Hass will be teaching three classes on magic through the Meeman Center at Rhodes College. The classes will take place at the Halloran Centre, and they precede a full evening show open to the public.

While Hass has now settled in Memphis, he frequently travels to Las Vegas for work. As dean of the McBride Magic & Mystery School, one of the premier magic schools in the world, his duties include educating magicians from all over the world on how to better their

skills. Most magic tricks that you purchase in the store don't come with a user's manual, but simply explain the technical aspect. While that might be good for impressing a few friends, Hass believes that much more is required to be a successful magician. "There's a profound difference between the experience of something that feels like a trick," he says, and something that feels like, 'Wow, that was magic.'"

In Vegas, Hass ran two programs for the school. The first was a graduate-level class focused on mentalism (mind reading), and was something that he incorporated into many of his shows. The class held about 25 students and taught them how to perform mentalism.

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The second was a TED-talk style conference that included 25 20-minute lectures. The talks ran the gamut from performance, running a business, and different elements of magic.

Beyond teaching obligations, the role of dean requires Hass to manage various business aspects of the school. Curricula is switched up to keep things fresh, while he is constantly on the lookout for any expert magicians who are available to guest-teach a class. Hass also serves as an advisor to the president of the school, Jeff McBride, himself a world-renowned magician. One of Hass' more recent initiatives introduced a scholarship program to the school. Since 2012, he and other magicians have worked to raise money so more students have the opportunity to attend the McBride Magic & Mystery School and improve their craft. Since 2012, the school has raised \$90,000

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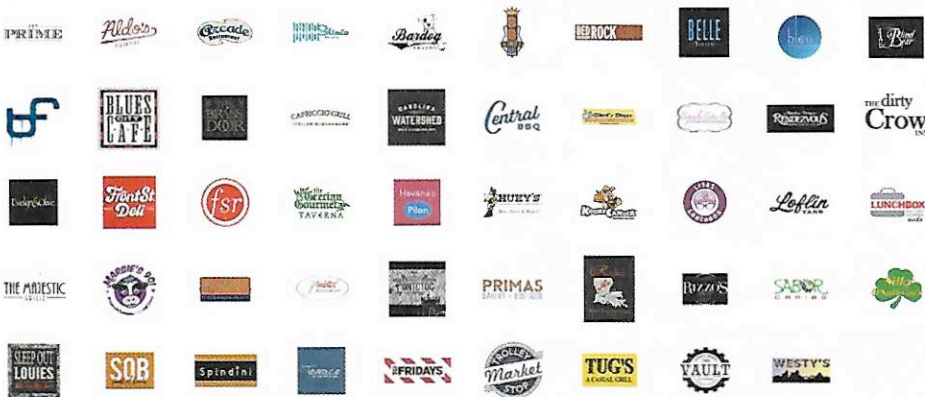
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and given out \$60,000 in financial aid.

The McBride Magic & Mystery School is located in Las Vegas, but Hass and McBride frequently hit the road for traveling performances and classes. Earlier this year, the two visited the United Kingdom, while a larger European tour is in the works for next year. The two sometimes bring along apprentices who are interested in becoming professional magicians. The apprentices will perform a few shows, but also have teaching responsibilities. After a tour, Hass and McBride continue monitoring the budding performers to help them along their career path.

For his students and apprentices, Hass always points out an important distinction between magic and tricks. If something feels like a trick, then that means the audience has approached the experience as if they've been fooled. True magic, according to Hass, is when people are left feeling astonished. That feat requires a more theatrical performance and an excellent grasp of the necessary technical skills.

A key component to that is avoiding what Hass calls patter. "Patter is the word people associate with the talk magicians do, but it's exactly what I teach my students not to have," he says. "I teach them to have great, well-crafted, beautiful words, and to combine them with theater skills, like acting and blocking, the use of lights and music, to augment the experience, misdirection, and the psychology of magic.

"There are many layers to the work of creating a live experience that feels like magic." The process is tailored to each student. Hass, a veteran of the magic scene, provides a voice of wisdom and advises students on things that should or shouldn't be incorporated into an act.

While he focuses on giving more opportunities for young magicians, Hass' passion for magic wasn't cultivated at a young age.

During his youth, he'd always been more interested in music, but eventually he went to graduate school and received a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Illinois. But, while watching TV with his kids one night, a David Copperfield special came on the air. "I realized that magic was this incredible art form that had been completely undertheorized," he says. "One of the areas of philosophy I specialize in is aesthetics. So I knew that whole literature, I knew that whole world, and no one had ever talked about magic as

an art form." From there, he quickly grew excited about performing magic and immersed himself in the world.

At first glance, philosophy and magic might seem like strange bedfellows, but Hass insists otherwise. "I was very interested in art as a philosopher, but I wrote my dissertation on perception and the experience of perception, and what perception comes like to us," he says. "So between my expertise in perception and art, it wasn't a very big step to see that magic was playing with both of those things.

"When I do a magic show, it is an application of my values and interests as a philosopher. One other element of

this, I think, is that I've always believed that philosophy is in the service of helping people live better, helping people to be inspired to live a better life. And my magic shows that quality, too. These aren't going to be dark, grim magic shows where people get hurt. My shows really are designed to help people see and experience and appreciate the wonders of the world."

Hass views each performance as a unique experience based on the audience. "Some people approach the art as if there's one routine they'll do, and they'll do it for everybody no matter what. But one of the things I've learned over my years of performing is the best shows don't happen that way," Hass explains. "The best magic shows happen

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LAWRENCE HASS
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by me, the performer, understanding who is going to be there, understanding how many people will be there, and then crafting a show that will work for them. So one thing is, when I know I'm performing for 300 people, as at the [Beth Sholom] benefit, it means that I need to do magic routines that people at the back of the room can

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beautiful words, and to combine them with theater skills. ...There are many layers to the work of creating a live experience that feels like magic."

see." Card tricks, as he demonstrated at the beginning of this interview, won't work for large crowds.

A second facet of crafting the show is taking into consideration what the audience is there for. While some are looking to unravel intellectual feats, others may just want to have a good time. "Some audiences are there to remember, but other audiences are there to forget. Some are there to have their head fed and be deeply enriched, while others are there for the party," he says. "If I perform the thinking show for the drinking audience, we're going to have a rough night. And vice versa. So that's another way in which I build my show, learning as much as I can about each audience and making the best combination of performing material to

CONTINUED ON PAGE 73



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 38

give them the ride into the world of wonder.”

Hass names several magicians who have influenced his work. Dai Vernon, whom Hass considers the greatest magician of the twentieth century, molded close-up magic into an art form. Juan Tamariz, a Spanish magician, is a master card artist who has written extensively on the psychology of magic and performance. One lesser-known magician whom

Hass credits heavily, however, was Chicago magician Eugene Burger. “He became a very close friend and teacher of mine,” says Hass, “and is probably the first magician to really draw a distinction between performing something that feels like a trick and performing something that feels like magic.”

The knowledge and experience that Hass has absorbed from his influences and during his career are present in several books he has authored. They tie in with his teaching mission of elevating technical practices to a much fuller experience, but also delve into what it takes to reach that level. “The magician has to use psychology, superlative technique, and clever devices to do everything they can to keep the technical level totally invisible,” he says. “An aspect of the work that many young or aspiring magicians don’t realize is how hard they have to work. I work on my

magic just about every day, practicing, rehearsing. Effective theater artists practice and rehearse, and young magicians have to learn that they need to figure on spending hours doing this.”

If practice makes perfect, then Hass makes sure he’s never off the clock. Whether he’s inviting a test audience of Rhodes College students to preview a new show or getting ready to attend a dinner party, Hass always has something up his sleeve.

“I never leave the house not ready to perform something,” he says. “Whether or not I do it is going to depend on whether it’s the right setting, or the right moment, or the right request. Sometimes I say no, but very, very often I say yes. And I often will perform at a dinner, for instance, even if I haven’t been asked. Because people come to expect the magician to perform, and I’m ready to roll.”

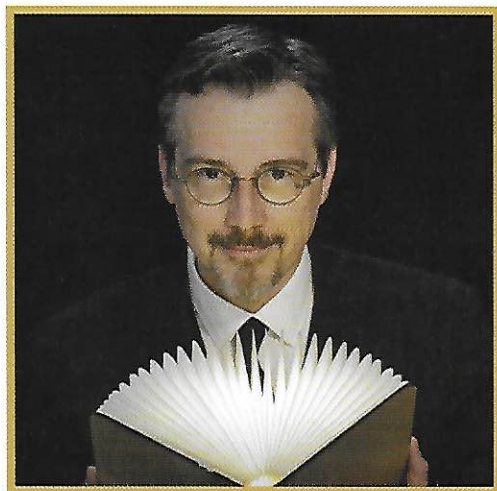
While some might find it difficult to be prepared at all times, Hass welcomes it. “I’m really glad that there are many opportunities

for people to see the kind of magic I perform. And I invite everyone to come with a fresh heart and an open mind, because my magic almost certainly will be different from what they’ve come to think magic is,” he says. “My goal will be to send them off with a whole new perspective, and a fresh look on the world and about the art of magic.”

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