Woo in Review: LANCE BURTON: MASTER MAGICIAN (Monte Carlo)

One of the funnest things an individual in Las Vegas can do with their spare time if they aren't using it to toss money directly down the metaphorical toilet is see a magic show. Perspectives on magic shows vary – some people might view them as glorified lounge acts; a form of entertainment on par with mime or synchronized swimming . I apologize to all mimes and synchronized swimmers out there. I'm sure your work has value too. Or something.

But those of us who are involved in skepticism know very well how important magic is, and I don't mean just because magicians from Houdini to Penn & Teller are so involved in critical thinking. I don't just mean because so many, like
Banachek
or
Jamy Ian Swiss
or the ever-vigilant
James Randi
, promote science. Science is a beautiful thing, truly, and anyone looking at the world on either a grand or minuscule scale can feel the power behind things like learning what an
atom
is, or the
composition of a distant planet
.

This is the sense of awe we get from knowledge. There is another sense of awe that comes from taking everything we know about the world and turning it on its head. There is one kind of person who can alter what we think we know so quickly that their title has become synonymous with the inexplicable. They are called Magicians.

I say all this because I have the deepest possible amount of respect for magicians and their work. They have a degree of elegance and skill that can only come from a lifetime of arduous, probably mostly thankless, practice. As a skeptic, I am deeply indebted to magicians for giving me these little mysteries. These odd moments when the world seems changed.

This does not mean that all magic shows are great. They aren't. Let me point, for example, to Criss Angel and Cirque du Soleil: *Believe*. I made it forty minutes into that travesty before practically running from the theatre, laughing hysterically at the fact that performers dressed as rabbits had just eaten Angel's burnt, dismembered corpse. I am not kidding. That really happened. If you want to see Criss Angel throw stunned-looking doves at the ground, then by all means, head on over to the Luxor. And I say this knowing the great work that Angel has done for skepticism. I'm sorry, Criss, if you are reading this. The show just sucks. And for God's sake, leave the dove work to Lance Burton.

Some shows are great, though. There are shows that take you back to your childhood. Back when magic made sense – when you'd wave a plastic wand around with a top hat falling down over your eyes, slinging your pet rabbit that would soon come to hate you by the scruff. I'm not associating modern magic with animal cruelty, it's just that some of us didn't realize you couldn't actually force the rabbit to disappear. Some magicians just make illusions look that good; that natural; so that we all think we can do it.

Lance Burton: Master Magician is one of these. The ease with which everyone performs makes me believe that if I had access to sixty birds, a stage, and some slammin' hotties, I could do it all. Of course, I'd be kidding myself, but hey, that's alright.

When I first saw the signs for *Lance Burton: Master Magician*, I wondered a bit. I mean, who refers to themselves as a Master Magician? But after meeting and speaking with Burton, I doubt he had anything to do with it at all. He has this mildly self-deprecating manner that led him, during the interview, to refer to himself as a “hillbilly in a tuxedo.” If he is a hillbilly, then I want to be one too. As it stands, though, after seeing the show, he is undoubtedly a master magician. The signs aren't bragging, they're just stating fact.

“I always felt like I didn't pick this path,” Burton said.

Well. It picked the hell out of him. He has been awarded the Magician of the Year award – twice – along with the Blackstone Theatre award and the Grand Prix award at Fédération Internationale des Sociétés Magiques.

But that's all just gab, right? How was the show? Well, I'm going to divide that into a couple of different parts because the performers I had the pleasure of meeting were simply so darn cool that I'm finding it difficult to jam them all into one quote-ridden review. Of course, first we'll go with...

LANCE BURTON

The show started off with Burton alone on the stage, doing moves with handkerchiefs, doves, and fire that went so fast that I am partially convinced that Burton is a reincarnation of Vishnu and secretly has four arms. And, of course, despite the hillbilly comment, Burton is all class. The tux, sure. The doves, everywhere. A cloak, gloves, and girls, girls, girls. Although one of the first things he did was shut all the girls in a trunk and turn them into doves. Seriously. He turned them into doves. I am convinced that's exactly how it happened, and you can't tell me any differently. Somewhere, somehow, there are a bunch of doves dressed in tiny sequined outfits. Okay, maybe not really.

After that, well, it's hard for me to think out a summary of all the truly awesome things you will see from Burton in this show. I keep consulting my notes to see where it all went next, and it's true that I took pages and pages, yet I was so caught up in the moment that now they all seem strangely coded. One of my notes, for instance, simply says, “Three ducks – and by God if they aren't trained well.” Another says, “And then they floated away on what I can only refer to as a cloud of bizarre midair sex.” I assume that, at this point, I was no longer talking about the ducks.

One of the many wonderful things about Burton's show outside of the rockin' babes and the magic itself is how family friendly it is. It sounds funny that I followed that comment on the tail of the one about bizarre midair sex, but I think that note might've been more about my own dirty mind than the actual content of the illusion (which was, by the way, a nifty double levitation). There are enough adult elements to make dirty people like me laugh a little, but it's all sort of an inside joke that the kids don't get, and nothing is blatantly... ahem... 'for mature audiences.'

So much of magic has become shock and gore, but not here. Sure, there are mildly scary things. A trick with a hangman's noose that actually has you wriggling around on the seat wondering what's going to happen next (I won't tell you, but it's awesome.), but Burton peppers all the scary parts with jokes and banter. As he was dragged toward the noose, for example, he yelled something about how they couldn't kill him because it would be really hard to change the name of the theatre. And it's because of this lighthearted approach that Burton's show can be a family activity. During the performance I saw, nearly all the volunteers were children, and you could tell they were thrilled – just as Burton was thrilled at the first magic show he attended.

When Burton was five, he attended a Christmas party in Louisville, Kentucky (his hometown) where a magician named
Harry Collins
was giving a performance. Burton was chosen as the volunteer for
The Miser's Dream
, a trick where the magician pulls coins off a volunteer. “I didn't know it wasn't real,” Burton said, “I thought I really had money.” I laughed a little at the idea of Burton at the age of five standing

in front of a mirror digging around in his ears for pocket change, but for any of us who saw a magic show at that age, we know exactly what he means.

“I just remember that feeling I had...” he said, “That feeling of wonder... I've always been trying to get back to that moment in time.”

And, according to Burton, performing shows is an avenue toward that. He lives vicariously through his crowd. “I know what it's like to go in and watch a show and feel amazed,” he said.

If you see this show, awe and amazement will be your feelings of choice. Cars will fly. Girls will disappear. There will be flames and costumes and switches and it's just impossible to explain the nonstop revelry in the art of magic. The illusions happen in such quick succession that you feel as though your brain is going to explode trying to figure out how they were done. Which is odd, since that's sort of how Burton feels when writing them.

“They just keep gnawing at you,” he said, “You have to do them and get them out.”

Burton even does magic in his sleep.

“Some tricks came to me in a dream,” he said, “... I'd been working on this problem for months and months. This was about 1985... I went to sleep and I was in like that Twilight Zone before you're really asleep... I actually watched the trick happen... It was just like watching a TV screen... I knew I had to wake up and write it down.”

At this point, something in particular was absolutely killing me. You see, before the interview, I had sworn repeatedly to myself that I would not ask any questions about how tricks were done. In a flash, I forgot all that and asked anyway. Bad on me.

“It's always something incredibly stupid,” Burton said.

And aha, I guess that means I've got him. It really is that he has four arms.

I asked him if people ever approach him in public to do magic – if they try to stab him with swords or cut him in half or something. But since his tricks are so family-friendly, so gore-less, he's not worried.

“If someone throws a live chicken at me, I think I'll be fine,” he said.

You heard him, everyone. The next time we see Lance Burton, it is permissible to throw chickens. Yeah, alright, probably not. But imagine how cool that would look... Then we come to...

MICHAEL GOUDEAU

Do not pee if you go see *Lance Burton: Master Magician*. I don't mean in your seat – that would actually be preferable. I mean do not leave your seat for anything. Invest in a

catheter
. Because you do not want to get up in the twelve minutes in the middle, when Michael Goudeau takes the stage.

Michael Goudeau is a juggler, ex-clown for Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus , writer and executive producer for
Bullshit!
, and was co-host for
Penn Radio
. But it all started off with other dreams...

“What I am is a failed forest ranger,” Goudeau said. Which illustrates another thing he is: hilarious. You have no idea how difficult it is to interview someone when you're snorking at all the jokes rather than writing things down.

“I'm the cheeriest guy in the world,” he said.

And boy does he spread it around. Not just to snorking interviewers and his audience, either. Goudeau has two adopted children that I had the pleasure of meeting: Joey and Emily. They are wonderful kids. Joey taught me all about food chains , and Emily showed me how to draw horses.

“I have the luckiest job and life ever,” Goudeau said.

Being kids, Joey and Emily have a lot of questions about the world. Goudeau, a skeptic, does his darnedest to answer them all in real-world terms rather than the series of platitudes I've heard parents use so often.

“I'm not sure there's any other option [besides skepticism],” Goudeau said, “A lot of those things – they really confuse me. I don't understand the preference in believing astrology to astronomy.”

Goudeau used to have a Creationism poster hanging in his bathroom – for fun, I suppose. But it made him so angry every time he went to the bathroom that he had to take it down. It has been

replaced by one detailing the human skeleton.

“It is the actions that make a person,” Goudeau said, referring to a conversation he and Penn Jillette once had, “... It is their words, their actions... That your people invented algebra is a lot less interesting than what you've done. Your words and your actions are what makes you.”

Goudeau is made of good things, then. His antics included juggling knives and bean bag chairs, and he also juggled fire while atop a six foot tall unicycle . And his performance, while amazing, wasn't the kind of arrogant crap that you sometimes get from people with talent (Sorry again, Mr. Angel), it was funny and sort of selfless. And of course, he has great support for comedy.

TOMMIE LAING

Tommie Laing is the comic relief to the comic relief of Michael Goudeau. He gets stabbed, set on fire, and dismissed from the show on a nightly basis. He also helps train the birds used in the show, and was kind enough to give me a tour of the bird area despite my deep fear of geese (which has roots in a childhood experience too painful to relive here). Laing is probably one the funniest people I have ever met. He clowns, he juggles. He did The Running Man in the middle of a casino. He is also the worst interviewee in the entire universe.

“I am a bird wrangler,” Laing said, “That is my preferred title. And as much as people think I like to be onstage, it's really all about the animals.”

And then he laughed. Which is sort of a hallmark move. There I was, sitting with my pen poised above the paper ready to take down any awesome quotes Laing happened to toss my way. I'd start writing, and then in mid-sentence he would laugh. And if he laughed, that meant he was kidding. Because of this, I have about fifty marked out beginnings of quotes from him. It would take me that long to realize he was still joking.

Freakin' clowns.

For instance, right here I have a quote from him that says “I hate magic,” and since I honestly don't remember if he laughed or not, I don't have a clue if he was joking. But is all the joking just a front?

“Clowns are sad people,” Laing said, “They have to paint their smiles on.”

I don't know if that's true or not, either. If Goudeau was right about actions being inseparable from an individual's identity, then Laing is made of good, happy things, too. Check out the photo to the right for an example. That's him and Goudeau clowning at Disneyland.