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MAGIC

M A G A Z I N E



THE GREAT
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MATT GROENING



BY MARK NELSON

He's magic's invisible man, a magician whose technique is so smooth, whose style is so relaxed, that some insiders call him Mr. Natural. For several of his last thirty years as a fulltime professional magician, he lived directly across the street from the Magic Castle, always available to respond to any summons from the club to fill in for a magician's late arrival, to provide a private show for a celebrity guest, or to perform a quick set to accommodate an overflow crowd for the club's tiny Close-up Gallery. He's spent most of his career living and entertaining within a few square miles of the Castle, but he has also made multiple lecture tours to Europe and Asia. And no wonder. He was brought up in the shadow of giants — Dai Vernon, Charlie Miller, Larry Jennings, Johnny Thompson, Max Maven, Johnny Platt and others — and after performing more than a thousand paid shows at the Castle, he's reached the point where he's almost more familiar to guests than the Open Sesame owl in the bookcase.

ALFONSO

MAGIC'S MR. NATURAL

His name is simply Alfonso. He left his last name behind in Ohio after moving to LA from New Philadelphia in 1981. He has earned accolades from such reputable magic educators as Juan Tamariz of Spain and Masahiro Yanagida of Japan. And he is supremely comfortable performing before any and all audiences — young and old, corporate and private, foreign and domestic.

Just beyond the wall sheltering that celebrated Open Sesame owl, in the Castle Close-up Gallery, a typical performance might begin with Alfonso's Coins Across routine, in which he produces four half dollars from his invisible coin purse, making judicious use of his table volunteers. One of the spectators is allowed to reach into the detached purse frame to produce a coin himself. As the coins fly invisibly and silently from hand to hand, Alfonso uses the spectator on his right, producing the third half dollar on the spectator's palm, and permitting the volunteer on his left to pour all four coins onto the green felt table for the finale. The coins penetrate the table one at a time, only to collect again under a volunteer's palm. While doing a sponge ball routine, Alfonso employs a crayon as a magic wand, encouraging a spectator to slide it through his own clenched fist to cause the balls to appear, disappear, and divide. An Ambitious Card routine demonstrates his ability to perform pasteboard miracles, and a four-ring Linking Ring routine done with five-inch rings leaves those who might have had a similar Adams set as a child shaking their head in disbelief. Finally, a paddle routine with an appearing, vanishing, jumping, and finally 3D production of a miniature Mickey Mouse brings smiles and applause to every member of the audience, regardless of age. Throughout the entire performance, Alfonso is relaxed, putting his audience totally at ease, asking them questions, probing for responses, touching them gently, all of his actions natural and timed exquisitely for maximum effect.

How does Alfonso create memorable and enchanting moments so effortlessly? He believes it's the result of spending time with the great close-up magicians who were in residence at the Magic Castle throughout the '80s. "Vernon's most consistent advice was 'Be natural,'" Alfonso recalls today. "The same with Juan Tamariz. When I visited Spain, Juan's mentor and collaborator Arturo de Ascanio asked me how I became so natural. I couldn't really answer; I just am. It came from all those years of being influenced by Vernon and Charlie Miller and Larry Jennings." Alfonso once asked Charlie Miller for advice on how to perform a particular routine. "He kind of brusquely told me, 'Just do it!' So that's what I do."

Like many others, the first magic Alfonso remembers was shown to him by his father, who was a doctor. "The one and only trick he did was to swallow a button and make it come out of his side. To this day, even though I can recreate it, I don't know exactly how he did it. I asked him once years later, and he just blew it off."

More influential in actually getting Alfonso started down the magic road were the Howard Brothers. "They were five or six kids who lived down the street and would tease me by doing card tricks over and over, but never telling me how they worked. One day, Danny Howard was on the phone talking to his girlfriend and, because he didn't want to hang up, I was able to bribe some secrets out of him in exchange for some milk and cherry-filled donuts."

With his interest in the magical arts thus stimulated, Alfonso started to acquire knowledge from a number of typical small-town sources. His friend Roger Vosahall took him to see a magic show when they were in grade school. Alfonso remembers the magician pitching simple tricks during intermission. An actor-magician named Jerry Prell taught Alfonso his first sleight of hand while they were both appearing in a play. It was the French Drop, but with a stone rather than a coin. Herb Matzinger, a high school art teacher, taught young Alfonso the Johnny Brown Homing Ball routine and also introduced him to the concept of the black-art table. Throughout those school years, the local library was the source for *The Amateur Magician's Handbook* by Henry Hay and Dunninger's *Complete Encyclopedia of Magic*, although Alfonso was initially distrustful of literary magic. He remembers thinking, *They wouldn't put real secrets in books!*

A newspaper ad placed by Myles Benadum brought Alfonso to his first magic club meeting, where Tim Deremer of Magic Crafters, located thirty miles away in nearby Canton, would frequently perform dealer demonstrations for the membership. Inspired by the club and by magicians he had seen and read about, Alfonso began magic lessons with Dan Fuller, by day a professor of English at

Kent State. "He was my first magic teacher," says Alfonso, "and he introduced me to the work of Vernon, Goshman, Slydini, and Bobo." It was under Fuller's tutelage that the student began to discover the skills that would serve him best as a close-up artist: palming and a spontaneous gift for misdirection.

In 1979, Alfonso paid a visit to a friend in California. On his first night in Hollywood, they were out sightseeing when Alfonso first cast his eyes on the Magic Castle. It was love at first sight. Barely 21 years old at the time, Alfonso's jeans precluded his entry into the club that day. Shortly thereafter, he relocated to Glendale, California, and settled into a room at

the YMCA. Acclimating himself to the area, Alfonso supported himself by working as a liquor store clerk, a busboy, and a bank teller. Providentially, the Glendale Y was located near the Maryland Hotel, a decades-old structure at Maryland and Wilson. The hotel featured among its amenities Julio's Barber Shop, the last chair of which was manned by local magician Dean

Dill. Dean, now renowned as a magical inventor, used to hold magic jams at the shop, a tradition he maintains today in his own establishment. Alfonso put in regular hours, engaging in long sessions with Dean and the locals who habitually visited Julio's for trims and tricks. It was Dean who provided Alfonso with his first guest pass to the Magic Castle, sponsored him for membership, and set up his audition to perform at the club.

On Dill's guest pass, Alfonso was admitted beyond the secret door to the Castle's inner sanctum and quickly became the proverbial guest who never leaves. He visited the club nightly, spending hours on end with buddies Ray Kosby and Bill Goodwin, absorbing magic and technique from the population of gifted performers who frequented the club in those days. Some of those lessons were pretty rough, but Alfonso had the talent and the backbone to hold his own.

One lesson came from Larry Jennings. "I was showing something to Larry, and be-

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fore I could get started, he told me, 'Young man, you're doing that wrong.' I asked him what he meant by that, and he growled, 'What, now you want lessons?' I said, 'No, but if you can tell me what's wrong with it, you ought to be able to tell me what's right with it!' Larry broke out laughing and a friendship was forged. Once, Larry accused Alfonso of doing "magic for the blind," because his patter was too expository; he was describing his actions as he was performing them. It was a good lesson, and Alfonso took it to heart, developing more mature presentations for his effects.

"Earl Nelson's book *Variations* taught me a lot," Alfonso says. "I learned how to routine a performance, how to link from trick to trick." From Mike Skinner, he learned that "the patter is sacred." From Chuck Fayne, he learned to "do as I do, not as I say." Both close-up veterans were explaining, in their own way, that although he might be free to duplicate another magician's sleights or tricks, the presentation and patter were sacrosanct and never to be appropriated. Alfonso rapidly discovered

how to use his audience as an asset in developing his original scripts. "I often hear someone say something funny that'll work perfectly with the trick, or someone's reaction will trigger an impromptu line from me that will get a laugh. I'll make notes and start using those things in every show." In such a stimulating environment, Alfonso was a fast learner and won his Magic Castle performing stripes in 1984.

Although the official policy of the Castle is to not book a performer more than twice a year in any showroom, Alfonso became the go-to magician for private parties, special events, and regular appearances in the Close-Up Gallery and the Parlour of Prestidigitation. The steady performances sharpened his skills to the point that, a few years later, he was approached by Masahiro Yanagida to visit Japan for a lecture tour. Yanagida mentors dozens of young Japanese magicians, including Shoot Ogawa. Thirty days later, Alfonso packed his bags and set off on the three-city journey, which also included a one-hour TV special, which he found a tad disconcerting because he had

only prepared twenty minutes of performance material for the tour. Exploiting the topics of his lecture — naturalness, timing, and misdirection — he easily filled the remaining time, and the program was well received and has been rebroadcasted frequently. He has since made four more visits to Japan, becoming well known among Japanese sleight-of-hand experts for his work on palming and misdirection.

Not long after his first Japanese tour, Alfonso was relaxing at the main bar of the Castle, when an eccentric-looking gentleman entered the club. "It was kind of late, sometime around midnight," he recalls, "and this guy with long hair and a big grin came in from the lobby. I was thinking, *Okay I can deal with this, I've been to Grateful Dead concerts.* Then the guy started blowing everybody away with his incredible magic." That guy was Juan Tamariz. Alfonso is fluent in Spanish, so he and Tamariz began one of the late-night sessions the Spanish master is famous for, closing the Castle and resuming their work in the lobby of Tamariz's hotel until after



(Clockwise from top left) Alfonso demonstrating a move in a session at Dean Dill's barbershop, working for laymen in Japan, an outdoors performance at a rodeo in North Dakota, and being filmed by NHK cameras for a 1993 TV special in Japan.

five in the morning. They repeated it again the next night. So impressed was Juan with the young man's talent that the next year, in 1993, Alfonso was invited to take part in a three-city lecture tour in Spain: Barcelona, Madrid, and Sevilla. The tour culminated in Tamariz's annual Journadas del Escorial convention, where the forty invitees present demonstrations on a topic of magic, for which they often spend a year in preparation. "The first year I went, the topic was Hofsinzler and Three Card Monte," Alfonso remembers. "Rafael Benatar, Carlos Vaquera, and Jim Krenz were there, as well as Magic Christian, who presented an act as Hofsinzler in period dress. It was an unforgettable experience." In June of this year, Alfonso will return for his sixth visit to Spain, this time lecturing in thirteen different cities, participating in the 31st Congreso Nacional de Magia and, at the request of Tamariz's daughter Ana, appearing at the magic school she runs, the Gran Escuela de Magia.

With international lecture tours, including visits to China, Honduras, Indonesia, Portugal, the UK, and his participation in magic's first international teleconference from Glendale, California to Valencia, Spain in 2003, why isn't Alfonso more widely recognized? It's by choice, he says. "I'm always fighting whether to tip or not to tip," he explains, "and I do few lectures, mostly out of the country. I believe in keeping magic a secret. And I also believe that a secret is information that travels one person at a time." Plus, Alfonso does not develop tricks and routines to sell on the road. "I study magic all the time, but I'm not really into new effects. I enjoy making the things I do better. I get more excited by a new subtlety or a line that makes the routine tighter than I do about a new effect."

Secretive of soul but naturally generous of spirit, the world of magic is fortunate that Alfonso does not always heed his own advice. In addition to his tour of Spain, he'll also appear at the Buffalo 52 Get-Together in October, another close-up convention limited to a single deck's worth of invitees (no Jokers). But if you wish to see a world-class practitioner of misdirection and timing work a close-up crowd as only he can, you might have to chance at one of his many corporate gigs or during a visit to the Magic Castle. He no longer lives across the street, but he can be there in just a few minutes from his home in the San Fernando Valley. And whether he knows you or not, he'll be happy to show you some remarkable magic — and happier still when he leaves you slack-jawed in disbelief.

Magic's Mr. Natural keeps on trickin'. **M**



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