

Tony Clark

The Man Behind the Many Masks

BY MARK NELSON

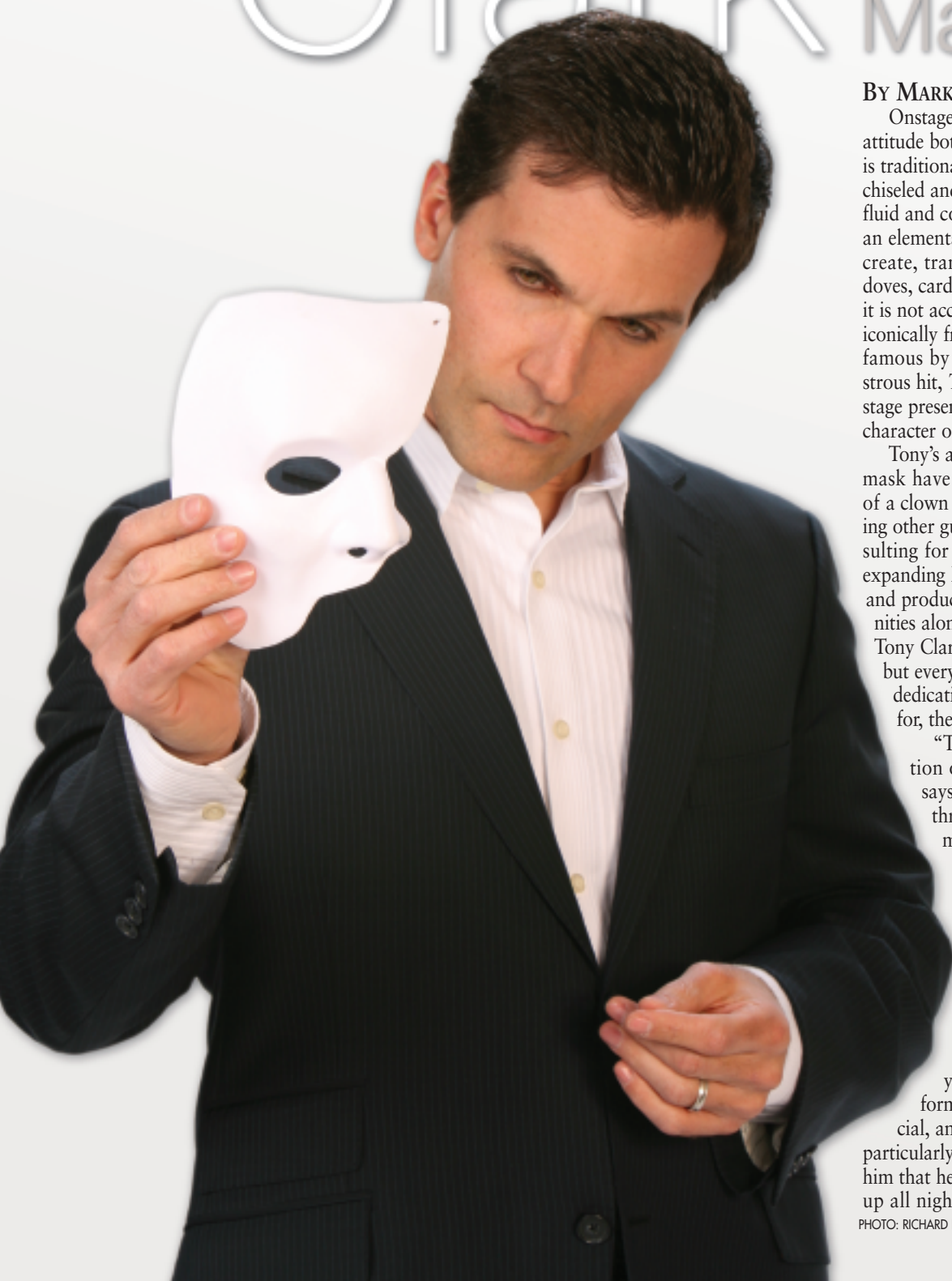
Onstage, magician Tony Clark conveys an attitude both elegant and powerful. His attire is traditional yet discriminating; his features chiseled and attractive; his movements at once fluid and compelling. His demeanor suggests an elemental being filled with the power to create, transform, and evaporate flame, doves, cards, and silks at his mere whim, and it is not accidental that his classic dove act is iconically framed with the half-mask made famous by Andrew Lloyd Webber's monstrous hit, *The Phantom of the Opera*. Tony's stage presence suggests the otherworldly title character of the musical show.

Tony's appearances behind the *Phantom* mask have become rarer than the sighting of a clown at midnight. He has been assuming other guises: lecturing and teaching, consulting for motion pictures and television, expanding his successful mail-order business, and producing revue shows in resort communities along the California/Nevada border. Tony Clark may wear many masks today, but every one of them was forged by his dedication to, and all-consuming passion for, the art of magic.

"The dove act really was the foundation of everything I've done," Tony says. "The strength of that carried me through and laid the groundwork for my own show and eventually into producing. When I talk to people about their careers, people I teach, I tell them they must have a foundational act. You always refer back to it, and it's a solid component of everything you do."

Tony grew up as Antonio Gublet (pronounced goo-blay) in Stamford, Connecticut. At six years old, he saw Mark Wilson perform on a *Magic Circus* television special, and the magic he saw that night — particularly the Asrah Levitation — so excited him that he couldn't get to sleep. "It kept me up all night. I had to learn how to do it,"

PHOTO: RICHARD FAVERTY / BECKETT STUDIOS



Tony recalled. Being a child of the East Coast, Tony was also able to enjoy *Wonderama*, Bob McAllister's long-running children's variety show, which often featured outstanding magical acts. Slydini and Al Flosso were two performers young Tony remembers vividly.

Not much later, Tony witnessed his first live magical performance in a local library. It further fueled the fires of his passion. He raided the children's section for every book he could find on magic, but the selection was rather slim. The pickings were more robust in the adult section, and it was while poring over these collections of magical secrets that Tony found the first trick he remembers performing — the Vanishing Saltshaker. He recreated the miracle for his family, and their reaction was overwhelming. "They were blown away. I liked this. I was very shy growing up, and I was able to use magic to get people to react without having to say much — I think that's what it was — seeing people's reactions to it. It impressed people. 'Oh, look how cute he is! He did magic!' Of course you're going to keep doing it."

Right next to the books on magic on the library shelves were books on ventriloquism and puppetry. Tony also experimented with these allied arts for a while, using a Simon Sez figure bought from Sears and, later, a Charlie McCarthy figure. His audiences were limited to his two older brothers and his parents. In retrospect, Tony admits that ventriloquial routines for third graders are rather limited in terms of subject and comedy material. In fact, *not* performing as a ventriloquist proved the key to Tony's future career.

"I auditioned for my school show with ventriloquism, but then my teacher, Sister Maria Superior, found out that I did magic. 'Do your magic instead,' she insisted. Obviously she didn't like my ventriloquism. I auditioned and she put me in the show against my will. I was so nervous." The flustered young performer came up with a series of excuses *not* to perform his magic, but Sister Maria parried his every thrust. When he didn't have a prop table, Sister Maria borrowed one from the church. When he needed a fringe for the table, she manufactured one out of a set of curtains. The word *no* was not in her vocabulary.

The day of the Christmas show, the determined Sister Maria almost had to shove young Tony onstage. Shaking from head to toe, the nine-year-old performed a Phantom Tube routine from a Blackstone magic kit, a Dove Pan, and the "vanishing apple." "I made a Flip-over Box out of a cigar box with a nail in the back, because I didn't know how it worked. I just jammed the apple into the flip-over box. But the audience was so nice — the reaction was great. They'd probably never seen a third-grader do a Flip-over Box anyway. My hands were shaking, literally wrig-

gling uncontrollably. But once people started to react to me, once I got off the stage, I knew it. That was it."

Like other junior magicians, Tony began performing for neighborhood shows and parties. He rapidly outgrew his stage fright and, as his magical skills sharpened and his confidence increased, began entering magic contests on the local level, winning back-to-back Teenage Magician of the Year awards from Ring 97 of the International Brotherhood of Magicians in 1984 and 1985.

Intensely competitive, Tony's interest in magic began to wander and he looked for other fields to conquer. His middle brother, Frank, had a set of weights in the basement and Tony started to work out with them, eventually carrying his interest to the local gym and working out with friends. "It was very social," he remembers. "I just liked the exhilaration of manipulating the body and being able to see what it does, and I was fascinated by the people around me and how they looked." To Tony, the visual aspect of bodybuilding was an art form, and he trained for a time with a former Mr. America, Joe Otera. But at the age of eighteen, after finishing third in the state of Connecticut in a teen bodybuilding competition, Tony decided that world was too political and subjective to the whims of local judges. He shifted his interest in exercise and development to power-lifting, a strength sport made up of events which require the competitor to lift and control tremendously heavy weights.

"Power-lifting was more honest. Either you lift it or you don't, and if you lift it, everybody sees it. I did very well; I came in second in the state. I had a record that held for a year or two, a 455-pound bench press." But engulfing himself in power-lifting, as rewarding as it was at the time, carried a heavy penalty. At 225 pounds, Tony stopped working with his doves; he no longer fit into his tails. He lost interest in magic and began serious training with national-level powerlifters who helped him rise to the top of his weight class. As many athletes did at the time, Tony experimented with steroids to increase his weight and strength.

In 1986, a friend invited him to attend Tannen's Magic Jubilee, the popular autumn convention organized by Louis Tannen's Magic in New York. "I was really big, and I felt kind of guilty. My family was always saying, 'What happened? You're not doing magic as much!' and I thought it would be cool to go to a magic convention." It was while wandering the dealers' booths and workshop sessions that Tony recognized a frail figure with piercing eyes and dancing fingers — the true master of close-up performance, Slydini.

Tony vividly remembers seeing Slydini's many performances on *Wonderama*. "I



Young Antonio Gublet, age two, smiles for the camera. The budding magician performs a birthday party show at age twelve. Three years later, fifteen-year-old Tony does his act in an IBM show at the Palace Theater in Norwalk, Connecticut.



Eighteen-year-old bodybuilder Tony, four weeks before taking third in state competition. Tony with his mentors: hugging Bill Andrews at Bill's surprise 85th birthday party, and posing with Slydini at the 1985 Desert Magic Seminar. The promotional photo for Phantasy in 1996.

thought, 'Oh my god, it's the guy that did the paper balls in the box.' Mark Mitton, a student of Slydini's, was at the convention, and I asked him on the spot, 'Can I take lessons from him?'" A generous Mitton made the introduction.

"I'm Italian, and I made sure I said that first," Tony recalls. "I started speaking to him in Italian. He always liked to mess with you, so he started speaking to me in Spanish. I looked at him with a blank stare. But that's the way he was. He was always one step ahead, one way or another. We talked and I told him my aspirations. I wanted to get back into magic; I had never felt anything as exciting as the feeling of doing magic. I thought, *I have to do magic for a living.*" It suddenly all poured out in the presence of the master magician. "That was a turning point, although I didn't know it."

Shortly after the Tannen's Jubilee meeting, Tony received a call from Slydini. "He asked me questions, probed me about what I knew. He liked the fact that I didn't do any of his magic. He liked not having to re-teach people; it was more difficult to teach somebody to break bad habits." Tony was an expert student, learning rapidly. After each weekly lesson, he would return home and practice tirelessly, until the dark hours of the morning. Slydini took him to Las Vegas the next year for the Desert Magic Seminar, toward the end of its days as an all-close-up convention. Slydini was one of the founders, with Joe Stevens and Siegfried. In Slydini's company, Tony got back into magic in a big way.

Slydini had a further impact on the young magician. Impressed with his dedication and work ethic, not to mention his skill, Slydini told Tony, "You're a great student... you could some day work The Magic Castle." Tony was delighted to hear this from his teacher; working at The Magic Castle was a dream he wanted to fulfill. "But one thing," Slydini continued, "you are just too big."

"I was very thick, very bulky. I couldn't wear a suit. People don't want to look at you when you're big," Tony remembers today. "I was huge. He was a tiny guy. But he said it in such a great way, I thought, 'Wow, he believes in me.' All I did was nod my head in agreement. My life changed at that exact moment. Little did he know that in two weeks I was scheduled to start a new drug and training regimen to get ready for a contest in the winter."

On the train ride home Tony became ashamed of himself, not only for drifting away from his love for magic, but also for risking his life taking steroids. "I was so disgusted with myself by the time I arrived home that I ran into my house and destroyed over a thousand dollars worth of deadly steroids and threw them into the garbage. It was the great-

est feeling of in the world." He once again became totally focused on magic. "No more power-lifting. No more experimenting with anything. I began eating healthier, losing weight, and doing magic full time."

Tony was the great Slydini's last student before ill health forced the master to retire. The two-and-a-half years Tony spent learning from him was a revolutionary experience. "I felt very lucky to have been able to study with him. Another year or more and I wouldn't have had the opportunity. It was fate for me to meet him at that time of my life. If I hadn't, I don't think I would have gotten back into magic as seriously. In response to his challenges, I got back my bird act, and that's where everything started happening."

Tony will happily admit that fate, in the form of individual guidance, has helped him choose the paths he would follow throughout his career. Fate intervened once again when the Society of American Magicians Assembly 33, located in his hometown of Stamford, invited Tony to perform in their annual Christmas show.

Bill Andrews was a stage magician who performed during World War II while serving in the Navy, and who traveled with his own *Evening of Magic* show for four years following the war. A clever businessman who utilized his skills in magic to increase sales, he eventually joined the Revlon Corporation and spent thirty years growing with the company. Bill rose to the lofty rank of Vice President of Sales and Marketing before retiring from the company's world office in New York in 1984. He began devoting time to the SAM, serving as chairman of the Life Membership Committee and later as National President (1987-1988). Stamford was Bill's hometown, and he happened to attend Assembly 33's Christmas Show that year. Impressed with Tony's stage presence and potential, he sought out the young man after the performance and offered his card. "You have a very good act," he told Clark, "And I think you should compete on a national level. Give me a call if you want anything. I live right here in Stamford."

"The word *compete* really grabbed me," Tony remembers. "A week later I brought a box of Italian pastries to his door and said, 'Here I am.' He started working with me, and that, I think, is the foundation of my life and my career."

Tony was being mentored by Slydini and Bill Andrews at the same time, and remembers both as very professional men, but also generous with their time and availability. Sessions with Andrews would last about an hour and Slydini's an hour-and-a-half. "Both took magic very seriously; it was all business when you did it. No messing around, you came to work. Slydini was technical and pretty structured. With Bill, it was more a

matter of sharpening the performance, of making what you already did better. He would look at the act or a routine and say, 'Think of what a real magician would do — how would you walk, how would you move, if you really had these powers.' For example, to produce a flame, you wouldn't have to use a lighter; Bill would suggest you'd produce it out of thin air."

In addition to his artistic suggestions, Bill urged Tony to select a stage name that would be easy to remember. Influenced perhaps by Bill's visualization techniques, Tony selected "Clark" for his new last name, after televi-

were placed into an onstage dove carousel. Tony then performed a fountain of silks that split into two fountains, a Bill Andrews innovation. As his music developed an echoing, challenge motif, each fountain continued to grow, first one, then the other, alternating from hand to hand, until two giant Blendo silks appeared, a dove fluttering dramatically at the top. After placing the doves in the carousel cage, Tony would vanish the silk fountains. "This was Bill's idea," he recalls. "There was nowhere to put those things. I would try to fit them on a table and they'd just fall off. So I made a big black servante,

terms of accomplishment, like it was definitely going to happen. I think that's probably the strongest thing I got out of him. Bill thought out of the box. Always very positive, but if something didn't work he'd tell you. And I asked him to be honest with me. I told him I appreciate compliments, but those are not going to make me a better magician. And I think that's why he liked me."

Peter Pit was on the Board of Directors of the Magic Castle in 1988 and was in the audience the night Tony won the SAM contest. Peter phoned Bill Larsen in Los Angeles with news of Clark's win, and shortly came an offer to perform at The Magic Castle, just as Bill Andrews had predicted. It was an unforgettable experience for Tony, the culmination of another dream. "I saw Mark, Nani, and Greg Wilson together there one night. 'I used to watch you guys on TV,' I remember telling them. It was surreal; I couldn't believe I was seeing those people. I worked with Billy McComb and Brian Gillis that first week. McComb was great to me, giving advice. Peter Pit was very nice and showed me around town. It was an awesome week for me. I was possessed; I would get into the Palace as soon as the doors opened up, every night at five o'clock, prepping the show and ironing my shirts."

The appearance was not without its financial burden. Part of Clark's act in the pre-*Phantom* days was a Snowstorm-to-dove appearance. "The first time I worked the Castle, I used Snowstorm and paper throw streamers. I used two throw streamers in the opening, two in the closing, and two loads of Snowstorm, all from Japan, the expensive heavy-duty stuff. I spent more money in paper products than I made in the week. I was from out of town, so I got \$50 more than the regular \$400. I learned to cut back a little bit. That was painful to lose, because I loved it. But as you get professional and you perform in more venues, you realize that Snowstorms are not practical and not the stage manager's favorite. And it's hard with dancers in shows. You learn."

One of the things Tony learned was that it was time to relocate. He returned from his week in Hollywood and announced to his family, "I'm going to California." It was the beginning of a very busy period for him, with work in Puerto Rico and the Midwest, and a two-month run at Magic Island in Houston, which was his longest booking yet. Jamal Rofeh, the owner of The Body Shop, a renowned strip club in Hollywood, was an enthusiastic magic supporter who had booked Lance Burton for a long run when Lance first came to Hollywood. Tony fit the venue well and worked there for six weeks. Magic Island in Newport Beach was a private club and Tony worked there until

Slydini would not allow you to perform anything until he gave you permission. You had to perform it for him again and again until he said, "Now you can do it."

sion personality Dick Clark. "Gublet is very difficult to remember and difficult to pronounce. It comes out gublet, goblet, jooblit, gibleit. I loved Dick Clark back then. He was a mega-producer of game shows, variety shows, TV shows of all kind. And I thought 'That's exactly what I want to do.'"

Under Bill's guidance, Tony Clark concentrated full time on readying his act for competition, which left him less opportunity for socializing among his fellow magicians. It's not because Tony is withdrawn by nature, but he is a self-confessed perfectionist and is unwilling, to this day, to share his magic or his plans with people until they are ready. Tony credits both his magical mentors for instilling in him this "hold out" attitude. "Slydini was a big advocate of that. He would not allow you to perform anything until he gave you permission. You had to perform it for him again and again until he said, 'Now you can do it.' With Bill, it was the same thing. He would tell me when it was right. Bill taught me visualization: envisioning the act, rehearsing the act, picturing myself performing at The Magic Castle in my mind."

The original competition act opened with Tony, dressed in tails and black scarf, touching a match to a square of flash paper to produce a tossed-out dove. Removing the scarf, Tony changed its color from black to white and from it appeared a second dove. Another flash and a red rose appeared at his fingertips. Removing a second rose from his lapel, Tony transformed both into silks and performed a Slydini knot effect, culminating in yet another dove production. The birds, as they appeared,

and I would make a sudden move and they'd disappear." A series of card productions, vanishes, perpetual fans, split fans, and a Fickle Fire to giant fan followed with a dove appearing behind the fan. The routine ended with the Carousel Cage Vanish. With the finish and tumultuous applause from the audience at the St. Louis SAM Convention on that June night in 1988, Tony was named Stage Magic Champion. "Bill said, 'This is the beginning, now.' And I always believed it."

Tony's studies with Andrews continued. "He was a great mentor, and we didn't only talk about magic. He talked about life, he talked about business and magic, all combined. That's really the foundation of what I have today. Without that I would have never made it to a professional level. He instilled in me the ability to think bigger, how to take bigger steps, look for better things, keep raising the act to a higher level."

Bill saw *The Phantom of the Opera* on Broadway and suggested his protégé see it. "It would be a good theme for you. It's a very theatrical and magical story," he told Tony. Like millions of other theatergoers, Tony was blown away by the tragic story and the lavish production. "The music was so powerful, it was just beautiful," Tony recalls. "So at Bill's recommendation I started using the *Phantom* mask. I just wore the mask at the opening of the act, and put it on again at the end. Later, the mask became an integral part of the act."

Tony remembers Andrews as a visionary, as a positive thinker. "There was a lot of talk with Bill about the future. 'When you work The Magic Castle... when you work a casino showroom...' he'd say, always talking in

the venue closed. The permanent emcee in Newport was Fred Wood, who later partnered in Wizardz on the Universal City Walk. "I love Fred," Tony declares. "He appreciated good acts, and he loved manipulation acts, the classic magic acts. Thankfully, I did that. He kept me alive for a lot of years."

Peter Pit at The Castle, Jamal Rofeh at The Body Shop, Fred Wood at Wizardz, and more all played key roles in the Tony Clark success story — magical godfathers who pushed him to the next level.

The Northridge, California earthquakes in 1994 made a lot of Angelenos nervous, and Tony started thinking about relocating. A number of magicians were moving to Las Vegas at the time. Lance Burton had opened his own show at the Hacienda, and had proven that success was still possible for magicians on the Strip. Many of the revue shows, like *Splash!*, *Spellbound*, and *Jubilee!*, were using magicians full time, and new hotels and new shows were opening as fast as the old hotels could be imploded. Still, Tony

was determined not to follow the pack. He was not going to move for the *promise* of work, only if he actually was *offered* work. The offer came from Dixie Dooley.

In 1995, Dixie was producing a mini-revue in the tiny Houdini Theater at O'Shea's Casino on the Las Vegas Strip: three dancers, illusions, Tony Clark, and Dooley... three shows a night. "He put tons of stuff on that little stage," Tony recalls, "but it was hard. Marketing was tough, and it was a small room." The contract lasted for three months. However, what came out of the run would keep Tony working into the millennium.

One of the three dancers in Dixie's show was Karin T'Beau who, with her boyfriend Robin Bond, had worked a revue in Lake Tahoe at the Horizon Casino. After a couple of nights, Karin asked Tony, "What are you doing here?" She insisted that he should have his own show and Robin agreed. He asked

Tony if he performed illusions. Tony was a part-owner of a Cube-Zag, but had only used the illusion intermittently to add time to his dove act. Still, he had ideas, and the strength of the dove act alone gave him credibility with Robin. Tony smiles at the recollection. "The dove act was the main thing on the demo tape that we used to sell the whole show. It added credibility for Robin's contacts at the Horizon.

"Wow, this guy's great — the *Phantom*,

that's theatrical — wow!" So Robin pitched hard. "Yeah, we'll have sets and girls!" We had some posed photographs of showgirls in mocked up scenes. "We have an *Indiana Jones* theme..." Actually, we had nothing." But they did have a name: *Phantasy*. Meanwhile, Tony continued his three-show-a-night regimen at O'Shea's.

One night, in the wee hours of the morning, the telephone in Tony's little apartment rang. Robin Bond was calling. "We got it. We got a year contract." Tony hung up the phone, waited thirty seconds, and then called him back. "What did you say?"

After the immediate shock wore off, Tony started working on the show with Robin and Karin. "I had no money. I basically built the whole show. Doug Leferovich and Seth Yudof, later known as The Gamesters, were up-and-coming magicians living and working in Las Vegas at that time, and they helped me build props and electronics." The workspace was Tony's tiny apartment, which also housed his mail-order business. The sale of dove tapes, invisible dove harnesses, and rising cards financed the building of production boxes, substitution trunks, and magic tables. Friends like Doug Molloy and Greg Gleason added their considerable talents. More props were rented from illusionist Russ Lewis (Russ Levine), including a Zaney Blaney Sword Box and a Broom Impale. Sets were built for the general look of the show and the *Phantom* scene. Karin Bond choreographed the dancers and made the costumes.

The show opened February 29, 1996, just one day before Tony's 30th birthday. While it eventually became the most successful production in the history of Lake Tahoe, early on the pace was exhausting. Though *Phantasy* was dark one night a week, every other night there were two shows, with five costume changes and Tony Clark producing doves, lifting dancers, performing illusions, and appearing onstage a large

chunk of the time. “The first few weeks I would go home and say, ‘I’m not going to make it. My legs and my knees and my ankles are so achy, and I’m just exhausted.’ I lived in that theater for the first year of the run.”

Tony threw himself into the show, working fourteen-hour days. He ran coupons around to the local hotels and motels, visited all the concierges in town, raced through the Horizon before the show if ticket sales were too slow, handing \$4-off coupons to the patrons in the buffet line. The effort paid off. “One December we sold out thirty days in a row, first show and second show. It was unbelievable. The hotel was making money with drinks and gambling; they couldn’t believe it.”

Phantasy opened with a short dance sequence followed by Tony’s classic *Phantom* dove act. After a brief “getting to know you” moment in which Tony assured the audience he could speak, Tony performed a Paper Balls Over the Head routine with a volunteer, leading into an *Indiana Jones* adventure sequence, which included the Sword Box — in which Tony reappeared with his shirt strategically torn to ribbons — and the Broom Impale. An Asrah Levitation led into the comedy spot, which was filled for the first eight months of the run by Chipper Lowell.

Tony then introduced a video clip of Slydini and dedicated the close-up portion of the show to his first mentor. Tony presented the Paper Balls to Box with his added touch of borrowed finger rings vanishing along with each paper ball, finally to reappear in a delicate gift box. While his partners had tried to talk him out of the Slydini segment, Tony dug his heels in. It turned out to be the audiences’ favorite moment in the show.

A tribute to Houdini wrapped up the show, with Tony performing a straitjacket escape and Sub-Trunk finale. In later years, the Houdini tribute was updated to include an Assistant’s Revenge, featuring a surprise vanish, and a Cage of Death, in which a manacled Tony escaped from a steel cage seconds before it was impaled with a dozen sharp swords.

The first year ended with such strong ticket sales that the Horizon extended the original one-year commitment to two, then jumped to four.

Tony became involved with the Lake Tahoe Boys & Girls Clubs. He would hold regular parties for the kids in the community, performing the show for them and having pizza and cookies afterwards. “I was so

Balancing dancer Jamie Keating on the broom, Tony strikes a pose in Phantasy, along with Judy Kim (right) and Cassandra Mistak. Tony portrays both the onstage and offstage life of Mario the Magnificent in two scenes from his play, Intimate Miracles.



PHOTO: MARK LEWIS



PHOTOS: JOHN MOHRING





[Top two photos] A 1999 publicity stunt in Lake Tahoe that later aired on television's *World's Most Dangerous Magic II*. The spiked vehicle causes an explosion as it destroys the crate in which Tony was chained, the magician having just barely made his escape. [Bottom two photos] Tony Clark behind the scenes in 2005 as unit production manager for an independent film, *The Third Nail*.

successful up there I just had to give back. It changed my life dramatically, going from living month-to-month to actually feeling good about my future." The Lake Tahoe Boys & Girls Club presented Clark with the 1998 Volunteer of the Year Award for his commitment to underprivileged children in the community.

Phantasy finally wrapped in 2000, after four years and 3,300 performances. A weary Clark moved back to Los Angeles, eventually selling his house in Tahoe and occasionally performing his dove act without the extra people, the extra props, the extra payroll, and

cept around a boy magician who rose to fame and fortune, yet was never able to find his lost love.

Consisting of a series of biographical vignettes, *Intimate Miracles* was a one-man show, with audience assistants and brief appearances by the magician's dream love, Victoria. The opening sequence introduced Mario the Magnificent at the height of his fame, performing his dove routine at the Palace in New York. A series of flashbacks depicted Mario as a street urchin performing a Six-Card Repeat, a clever Miser's Dream with his tip can, and a Cut-and-Restored

"I was so successful up there I just had to give back. It changed my life dramatically, going from living month-to-month to actually feeling good about my future."

the extra stress. But an unmasked Tony Clark cannot remain at rest for very long.

Seeking a new challenge, Tony started working with the Pacific Resident Theater in Venice Beach, a highly regarded theater company which has garnered dozens of critical awards for excellence in the Los Angeles area. His acting coach was Marilyn Fox, the artistic director of the company. It was stimulating, stretching his creativity in a new direction, but Tony found it a less satisfying experience. He joined the ranks of L.A. actors auditioning for roles in commercials, plays, and television parts, but didn't like many of the roles he auditioned for. It was uncomfortable for Tony to try to fit someone else's concept of performing. He had to bottle up his own passion for performance in order to meet the expectations of others.

Tony's exercise in theater culminated in the production of a show of his own, which combined magic with a touch of romance and a bit of fictional autobiography. The show was titled *Intimate Miracles — A Magical Story of Life, Love and Legerdemain*. The title, though not the subheading, was borrowed with permission from Dean Dill, the title of one of his innovative instructional videos. The end product changed quite a lot from its early conception. Originally, the play was to be a story of Slydini's influence on magicians and one magician in particular. Tony hired writer/director Lance Lane, who had a vast amount of experience in local theater through productions he had mounted as a playwright in residence at the Lee Strasberg Theater Institute. Lance brought a different vision to *Intimate Miracles*, rewriting the con-

Rope. Mario's first paying gig was a birthday party for Victoria, including Spot Card, Paper Hat Tear, and a multiple coin production, an act of defiance performed when Mario is cheated by Victoria's mother out of half his fee. A grocery store sequence featured a comedy vanishing radio and the play's most poignant moment, in which Mario produced his Victoria from a wardrobe mirror, only to have his vision float away, out of reach, and finally disappear in an Asrah. The mirror illusion was a stunningly beautiful prop created by Greg Gleason. Tony bought the effect from Gleason; in return, Tony later directed *Gleason Magic* for his fellow illusionist at the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas. A tour sequence including a comedy rope escape, Slydini's Torn-and-Restored Newspaper, and a rose petal-to-egg-to-dove transformation brought *Intimate Miracles* full circle, with Mario miraculously reunited with his long-lost love through a split-second, black-art production.

The play opened April 7, 2001 at the Fremont Center Theater in Pasadena for a six week run [see *MAGIC*, June 2001]. The story and the magic were well integrated, and Tony's performance well suited to the character of young Mario. "The play was a good exercise," Tony remembers, "but I should have held my ground on the Slydini aspect, like I did in Lake Tahoe."

As challenging as the show was for him as an actor, *Intimate Miracles* was most rewarding in another way. It was another Tony Clark production. "I enjoyed producing the show. I had some vintage photos taken, soundtracks and music and costuming. I was really jazzed by that." Tony was ready to

wear yet another mask, applying the knowledge he had gathered over the years from his teachers, from fellow performers, directors, producers, and from stages around the world, and put it to use. "I started writing a journal, a little book for keeping a record of my goals. My first steps toward producing."

No sooner was the ink dry on Tony's producer journal when he received a call from Paul Reder, formerly Entertainment Director for the Caesars Palace properties. Now aligned with the Horizon in Lake Tahoe, Paul had a three-month hole in his 2004 show schedule, and he wanted to bring back *Phantasy*. Tony gracefully declined, but offered to produce a magic show with illusions and comedy to fill the gap. "Write it up," was Reder's response. Tony did, calling his blend of magic, comedy, and illusion *Fusion*. The principal performers were illusionist Jason Alexander, comedy juggler Bryson Lang, and magician Gregory Wilson.

Tony conceived the show as a non-stop explosion of entertainment, with no emcee to introduce the acts. In fact, the acts never completely finished their sets before a new piece of material would crash through. "Acts came in and out of each other. Nobody did their spot and left. You saw everybody two or three times throughout the show. You never caught your breath. In an hour and fifteen minutes, the show never stopped." After the first month, ticket sales were way up. Naturally, when the original contract ended, the Horizon executives asked for the show to stay another three months.

Fusion ran for the entire year, and with a few cast changes — Eric Buss replacing Wilson and Tony's old *Phantasy* friend Chipper Lowell returning to spell Lang — expanded into two years. Tony gives the cast a lot of credit for the success of *Fusion*, but he also believes the show's free-wheeling format had a lot to do with it. The audience never had the chance to get tired of the show because of its irregular rhythm. "I like erratic rhythm, as long as it's not confusing," Tony explains. "I like seeing the guys on stage for less than fifteen minutes. I think that's the longest segment in the show, twelve to fifteen minutes. Modern audiences are hard to hold. Look at the home gaming industry. First Xbox, then Xbox 2, Xbox 3.... Always faster, always quicker, always a jump ahead of you." That, Tony thinks, is *Fusion*.

Tony and producing partner Paul Reder still "own" the Horizon showroom. *Fusion* was replaced by *The Chipper Lowell Experience*, which closed in January and was followed by TV's *Magic Stars* with Christopher Hart, Chris Mitchell, Jonathan Neal & Liane, and Joel Ward. At the River Palms Resort & Casino in Laughlin, a new edition of *Fusion* began last fall, with Danny Cole,

Bryson Lang, and Joseph Gabriel & Katalin. Joseph thinks Tony is an easy producer to work for. "As a performer himself, he appreciates the sensitivity of the artist and he'll negotiate for material he wants you to use. You get a good sense of give and take from him."

With the live shows up and running in Laughlin and Tahoe, Tony has recently been working Hollywood hard, pitching television and film projects, some with magic themes, some without. He takes on students occasionally, remembering the influence Slydini and Bill Andrews had on a promising young magician's career. He has also found himself in demand as a magic consultant, working with Tom Nunan (executive producer of *Crash* and *The Illusionist*), Nicholas Cage, John Malkovich (on the forthcoming *The Great Buck Howard*), and magician-turned-actor Steve Valentine (*Crossing Jordan*).

And yet Tony's greatest production has yet to make its debut. His wife Susan is about to have the Clarks' first baby. At 40 years old, the

dad-to-be figures it's a late start for him, but it's perfect timing. "My lifestyle is perfect for it. Susie and I can work out of the house, so we can give proper care and attention to a baby. I've always wanted kids, and Susie loves kids."

Once a year, Tony returns to his roots in Stamford. His mother passed away a few years ago, but his father still lives in the same house that Tony and his brothers, Frank and Edward, grew up in. "My mother loved the bird act and Slydini's magic. The whole family loved it. They never pushed me, but they supported me. I talk to everybody weekly. I don't tell them everything I'm up to because they don't understand a lot about this business; I don't want to overwhelm them."

One person who is not overwhelmed or even surprised at Clark's success is Bill Andrews. Tony, who two years ago threw a surprise party celebrating his mentor's 85th birthday, credits much of his own positive outlook and techniques he uses to accomplish goals to Andrews' influence. "All the things Bill ever talked about came true. I told him that on his birthday, but he knew it back then. He believed in it. 'I never doubted it.' That's what he said." ♦



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