

The Comedy & Magic Society

Picture a quiet Friday night in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Most of its 60,000 citizens are unwinding in familiar ways: having a drink with friends, going on a date, playing with their kids, or catching a movie. They'll gossip, kiss, laugh, or maybe get tipsy before they fall into bed and when they wake up on Saturday life will continue as it always has.

Tonight, though, 99 people have set aside their usual end-of-the-week rituals to go to the Comedy & Magic Society's monthly show at the Gaithersburg Arts Barn. Founded in 2005 the Comedy & Magic Society is the joint project of four hard-working professionals: Mark Phillips, Bob Sheets, Brian Curry and Barry Woods. They have over 100 years of cumulative magic experience and each of them could (if he weren't too modest) justifiably claim to be one of the world's finest magicians. But this is only part of the reason why one Friday of every month 99 people turn up at the Arts Barn, eyes popping with anticipation.

Many of them have been before because live magic performed at this level is strangely addictive. You get hooked on the thrill of anticipation and the little adrenaline bursts of surprise. It isn't something you can DVR, download or Google, so people come back – and bring their friends. First time visitors to the sturdy red-brick former stable building enter a little more cautiously. Some are excited, others are sceptical; some of them want to be entertained, others have notebooks tucked in their pockets. All are curious.

The magic begins as the audience mingles and makes its way to the alternating bright purple and lime green seats. Nick DeCuites and George Woo, the Comedy & Magic Society's resident close-up men, circulate through the theatre picking pockets, popping cards or conjuring the unexpected. Grown-ups laugh and gasp. Kids crane their necks to follow the flying fingers but their eyes can't move fast enough. Then the lights dim, the curtain rises and the Producer arrives on stage. CMS's four co-producers take it in turn to host and emcee the shows. Tonight let's say it is Bob Sheets, the avuncular comedian with a grin as big as the Ritz.

If you want to know anything about magic or, indeed, the history of American popular entertainment in the 20th century, Bob is your man. He was born in California, the land of prospectors, dreamers, and professional make-believers. One of these was Paul Winchell, a ventriloquist who also patented the first artificial heart. Inspired by Winchell's TV show, Bob taught himself ventriloquism. But when his dad bought him a magic kit he gave up voice-throwing because, at the ripe old age of 10, he thought it was "kid stuff". Magic, on the other hand, merited study.

The wisecracking schoolboy ("I always had to have the last word," he chuckles) used to rush home after class to practice new tricks. Unlike most kids, he didn't mind getting sent to his room because it meant more time to perfect his craft. Bob joined the San Diego Junior Magic Society. At 13 he was performing at parties and clubs; at 15 he was a seasoned performer – as well as being America's youngest Fuller Brush Man. Door-to-door sales and magic require many similar skills: you have to engage with strangers, win them over, put them at ease, and convince them you have something they need. Bob, with his effervescent enthusiasm, was darn good at it. Academics were a different matter. "I was a D+ student," he says. "They only let me graduate because they knew there was no point in keeping me."

Bob finished high school in 1968 when the military was snapping up men to send to Vietnam. He joined the Navy but was discharged 17 days later when they found he was allergic to the regulation wool blankets. Instead, he went down a path trod by many legendary entertainers: he joined the circus. Between pounding tent stakes, driving trucks, and packing down, he polished his performance skills in the main ring and his close-up skills as a sideshow act. Working with the circus was more than a chance to perfect tricks. It was Bob's initiation into a centuries-old fraternity of itinerant entertainers whose heritage runs from medieval minstrels and court jesters to vaudevillians and, of course, illusionists.

All four of the Comedy & Magic Society co-producers are enmeshed in the traditions and history of magic. This enthusiasm shapes and spurs their careers, and is integral to the CMS ethos. Brian Curry, the youngest member (Mark describes him the D'Artengean of their troupe of magic musketeers) began his education at the renowned Denny & Lee Studio in Baltimore, and was tutored by card wizard Peter Galinskis. "He'd make me rehearse one little move over and over," Brian says. "He wouldn't let me start a

new one till I learned the last one.” Brian was a young teenager at the time, but magic was already more than a hobby. “It helped me break out of my shell,” he says. “I wasn’t very good at talking to people and it was a way for me to communicate.”

The son of an IBM executive, Brian spent most of his childhood in Tokyo and Paris. Moving between countries on a regular basis fostered independence and resilience – traits that stand him in good stead as a professional magician. As soon as he learned his first trick in sixth grade he was hooked, and regularly spent two or three hours a day practicing. “It was luck,” Brian says of his career. “So much luck.” But, like his co-producers, Brian works ferociously hard for his good luck. When he was 15 he contacted Mark Phillips at a magic convention and asked if he could show him a competition routine. It was a memorable meeting. Mark turned up with a handful of other famous magicians and the youngster promptly bombed. “His act was a disaster,” Mark laughs. “He had problems you wouldn’t wish on your worst enemy.” Still, they took him to dinner afterwards.

Years later that friendship would help form the Comedy & Magic Society but first Brian had to perfect his craft. Luckily (this time it really *was* luck) Clyde’s, a local restaurant, booked a magician who also happened to be a conman. The conman/magician got busted and his prison sentence was Brian’s big break. The shy 15-year-old went to work doing close-up magic for diners waiting to eat. Seventeen years later Brian still works there, delighting Clyde’s hungry customers. He credits the gig with helping pay his way through college – and honing his skills so he’d never have to use his degree.

None of the Comedy & Magic Society men took for granted that they would be successful as professional magicians. Mark Phillips, a corporate magician who spends most of his time performing at industry trade shows and events, holds a degree in microbiology. “My parents wanted me to have something to fall back on,” he explains. By the time Mark went to university, though, he’d already laid the foundation for a future far from microscopes and laboratories. His father was a career Army officer and Mark was raised in military outposts like Fort Hood, TX; Fort Leavenworth, KS and Fort Huachuca, AZ. As the smallest kid in the class, Mark was a self-professed class clown and discovered that doing magic was a way to get noticed and make people laugh.

Also, you had to make your own entertainment on remote military bases. Fort Huachuca, where they moved when Mark was in eighth grade, is in arid high-plains country 15 miles north of the Mexican border. There isn't much to do there, or in neighboring Sierra Vista where Mark went to high school. One of his activities was playing trumpet and trombone in the school band, which often performed on base. Mark, ever the over-achiever, would perform magic on stage while the band was taking its break, thus earning his stripes in front of a tough military audience.

By the time he earned his degree Mark knew he wanted to pursue magic full-time and moved to New York to make his way as a corporate entertainer. It was the boom years of Wall Street and Mark dove into his profession with the same gusto as the traders and bankers around him. The dizzy world of high finance has long since spun itself out while Mark, by contrast, has honed his craft and career with discipline that must make his dad proud. He attributes his perfectionism to a lifetime of playing classical and orchestral music (he now plays the French horn, which has a reputation for being fiendishly difficult to master). "I have very high expectations of skill level," he says. "A performance has to be well-rehearsed."

These expectations infuse every Comedy & Magic Society show. Ask any of the co-producers what their biggest challenge is, as a magician, and they'll tell you it is trying to change an audience's expectations. Most people's experience of live magic is limited a performer at a kid's birthday or a friend showing off card tricks. "People don't see much *good* magic so winning them over can be an uphill battle," Bob says. As a result, CMS is incredibly protective of its audience's experience: "We don't lower the bar. Our guests are professional magicians and they have to hit a certain level before we let them in front of our audience," he adds. The Gaithersburg Arts Barn shows usually feature one or two guest performers, in addition to Mark, Barry, Brian or Bob, and these guests are culled from the co-producers extensive contact books.

"Bob's been a big name in the magic world for a long time and has a lot of friends," Mark says. "If anyone is passing through he'll buttonhole them and say 'come do our show, it's a lot of fun.'" *Fun* is one word to describe the CMS shows. Others are: *exciting, social, electric, family-friendly* and, above all, *funny*. Most magic shows are about highlighting the dexterity and skill the magicians. Add comedy, though, and the whole dynamic changes. The relationship between audience and performer shifts. Barriers

melt away. As a magician, it is tempting to treat the audience like the enemy: you want to fool them, put them on the wrong foot. Mixing comedy and magic, however, requires a different mind-set. “It’s easier when the audience goes with you willingly,” Mark explains. “You need charm and personality. You need to be a good communicator.”

Communication skills don’t come naturally to everyone, though – not even magicians. Barry Wood, the group’s resident actor and improv expert, says he was “kind of a loner at school. Magic was a hobby I could retreat into.” He’d go off to the library and read about the history of magic and the lives of famous performers. “I was fascinated by every aspect of the art,” he recalls. This fascination drew him out of his shell and into Barry Taylor’s legendary magic shop. The elder Barry became his mentor, and Wood credits him with taking an introverted kid and putting him on the path to being a world-class performer. Young Barry learned that communication could help smooth out a less-than-perfect trick. “At first, I was just trying to fool people, but once I learned about presentation the challenge was to weave a story and connect with my audience.”

The best magic is about making connections and a gifted performer with enough tricks up his or her sleeve can weave a spell anywhere. After an apprenticeship that included working weekends at Barry Taylor’s shop, Barry Wood filled in for a friend doing magic at a pizza restaurant. He left his first paying gig “on cloud nine,” with a bellyful of pizza and cash in his pocket. The die was cast. Barry went to college and majored in marketing but he funded his degree by performing magic. “I always enjoyed giving class presentations – maybe in the back of my mind I knew I wanted to do magic,” he recalls. Still, the penny didn’t drop until Barry began looking for a marketing job after graduation. When interviewers found out he did magic they were intrigued; they wanted to talk about shows they’d seen, or tricks they knew. Many asked why he wasn’t doing magic, since it was clearly his passion. “I thought, ‘maybe they’re right.’” To his relief his parents were supportive, and Barry began his professional career in earnest.

One of his formative experiences was working with Bob Sheets at the Brook Farm Inn of Magic, a restaurant/magic haunt in Maryland run by Bob Sheets and partner Steve Spills. At first, Bob and Barry seem like polar opposites: Bob is the bluff, ebullient journeyman firmly rooted in the great American tradition of life on the road. Barry is reserved, thoughtful and precise; he likes bookstores and wineries with nice views. But they have a lot in common when it comes to magic. Both cite street magic as the ultimate

challenge. “If people don’t like you, they walk away,” says Bob. “It doesn’t get any tougher, or more honest, than that.” Barry, who taught himself fire-juggling to avoid dead time while doing street performances at Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, agrees. Always eager to develop his skills, Barry began to study acting and improv. He joined an improv group then helped found comedy sketch troupe Dropping The Cow.

“Barry can do anything,” Brian says. “You would never pick him out in a crowd as a professional entertainer. He’s so quiet and humble. Then he gets on stage and destroys. It’s awesome.” Brian jokes that he’d like for Barry to suck at something “because it would make me feel better” but they are more alike than different. Both have a passion for working with kids – which is probably only slightly less demanding than street performing. Brian does school assembly shows, including a magical mathematics review and a book club, while Barry works with a professional counsellor doing an anti-bullying show that tours schools in the greater Washington DC region. He is also a long-standing member of the [Big Apple Circus Clown Care](#) program. To Barry, cheering up sick children is the apotheosis of his magical art:

I’ve found an audience for all the skills I learned that were inner-focused, that I learned for myself. I don’t know if it’s destiny or what, but now I have an opportunity to use my abilities in a positive way, whether it’s helping school kids dealing with tough situations, or making a child laugh in his hospital bed and seeing the relief on his parents’ faces. I’m lucky to be able to use my abilities in a positive way.

Ask any of Barry’s colleagues and you’ll hear similar sentiments, albeit coached in different terms. Brian, along with Mark and Bob, does regular gigs on cruise ships, and delights in the way magic transcends culture and nationality, helping him unify a room full of strangers who don’t even speak the same language. Mark gets a buzz out of magic’s ability to transform the ordinary: “When an audience sees magic they think about things they don’t usually think about. They have a chance to think about the everyday things they take for granted.”

This passion for making the impossible real fuels all of the Comedy & Magic Society members. Make no mistake: magic is hard work. They travel a lot and pulling

together their beloved Arts Barn shows requires commitment and sacrifice. “We work so much we’re rarely in town at the same time,” Bob says. “But when we are it’s a *killer* show.” In addition to long stints on the road they face the physical and mental rigor of regular performance. One of Mark’s corporate trade-shows, for example, involves eight-hour days of repeat performances to an ice-cold audience that has to be won over; over and over again. And anyone who knows kids can imagine how tough it is to convince school kids to take an interest in math!

In addition to the challenges of the work itself, is the challenge of finding or creating work. “You have to be really self-motivated,” says Brian. “There is no manual telling you how to make a living. You have to constantly evaluate how you run your business, your show, your website....” They each have their own way of thriving: Mark taught himself German so he could work trade shows there; Brian has a crop of entrepreneurial side projects; Bob spent 15 years mixing drinks and conjuring surprises as a bar-tending magician; Barry does everything from one-man shows, to toddler’s birthdays to Presidential inaugurations.

To some it might seem like a hard way to earn a living but Barry, Mark, Bob and Brian brim with joy and enthusiasm for what they do. “I’m grateful to be getting paid to do something I love,” says Barry. “I’m blessed.” This gratitude and energy flows through their work both as individual magicians, and as the Comedy & Magic Society collective. That is what lends the air inside the Arts Barn its sprinkle of magic dust one Friday a month. Magic, as performed by the CMS and friends, is the art of celebrating what’s possible. “Magic can lift people’s feet off the ground, if only for a moment,” says Bob. “You never know what the result will be. You get a kid in front of an audience and he realises it’s okay to get in front of people, it’s okay for people to laugh at – and with – you. It gives him confidence.”

Children and adults alike leave the Arts Barn wide-eyed and flushed with laughter not just because of the flawless routines and peerless patter, but because Brian, Bob, Barry and Mark are walking, talking, juggling proof that you *can* fulfil your dreams and that the world is alive with possibilities. “Magic reminds us there are a lot of things in the world we take for granted,” Mark says. “If we experience a moment of magic and wonder in a performance we start paying attention to the wonder in other parts of our lives.”

