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Steve
Spill



PHOTO BY SAL TAYLOR KYDD





The *Truth*
About My Tricks
and *Other Lies*

Steve
Spill
by Dustin Stinett

In the shadow of a sign

so dilapidated that it—charitably—read “HULLYWO D,” Los Angeles of the 1970s was witness to a great artistic shift. Clubs like the Troubadour, Palomino, Topanga Corral, Whisky a Go Go, and others were flourishing. On any given night people could hear the incredible voice of Linda Ronstadt, experience the soulful and searching lyrics of Jackson Browne, and rock, with a country edge, to the Eagles, among the other artists and bands that would eventually reach superstar status. In the middle of it all was a young comedy magician named Steve Spill doing his thing in the same venues.

In his new memoir, *I Lie For Money* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2015), Spill recounts these and other memories over a 50-year career that, from the standpoint of “mainstream magic,” could be described—again, charitably—as unusual. It is a journey that takes him from growing up around The Magic Castle, performing there as a teen, working venues that, he admits, “weren’t looking for a teenage card expert,” his experiences around the L.A. music scene, the comedy club circuit, an Aspen bar, busking, a Maryland restaurant, casino showrooms, television, and finally to a dream come true: his own magic theater, Magicopolis, in Santa Monica, California.

Steve Spillman was born in San Francisco in 1955. His parents, Sandy and Shirley, were regulars on KPIX-TV in the Bay Area: the first television station in Northern California. Sandy was an avid magician—he was active in the area’s magic club scene including acting as president of the local S.A.M. assembly—and occasionally used magic on his television shows as a “warm up” for

the audience; “before the real big prizes started rolling in,” quips Steve, “You know, like electric can openers.”

Steve’s first memory of magic was watching his mother and father on TV with his babysitter. “I was four. The sitter was for my baby sister, Susan,” he assures us. Sandy did a torn and restored tissue to hat. Shirley’s restored tissue didn’t change into a hat. Steve details the ensuing banter between his pretty mother, with the lady’s panties on her head, and his father in his book. The effect on him, Steve swears, is that this is *the* moment he decided he wanted to be a magician; “if it wasn’t, it should have been,” he adds.

The family moved to Los Angeles in 1959, but the pressures of hustling for work in the TV business took its toll on Sandy. He suffered from ulcers and was confined to bed rest by his doctor. It was during this time that Sandy taught his son the same three tricks his own father—a tailor—had taught him as a youth. “It was the string trick—the one where you untwist the string so it looks like two pieces that then turn into one—the magnetic wand trick, and the one with the crayons where you can divine the color while it’s behind your back,” says Steve. Some of his early publicity touts Steve as a “third generation magician,” though he has no illusions about there being a Spillman Family Dynasty of Magic. “I gave my first public performance at my elementary school talent contest. I was six years old.” The performance was an accidental comedy extravaganza, the result of him ending up on his hands and knees chasing down a wayward gimmick; the audience laughed thinking that it was all part of the act. “I thought, ‘I did that. I made people laugh.’ I didn’t mean to, but it felt good so it turned out to be a good thing.”

It was through the TV industry that Sandy Spillman met Bill Larsen, Jr. “Like everyone in the business, dad’s résumé had everything he could do listed on it, and one of those things was magic. Some TV exec saw that and told dad about Bill, who was, along with Milt, working on getting The Magic Castle opened.”

Sandy would eventually become a fixture at the new club for magicians, working first as a host, manager, and then followed in the footsteps of E. Raymond Carlyle (Ed Fowler) as the host medium for the Houdini Séance. Sandy Spillman spent the next 16 years of his life working at The Magic Castle.

By the time he was 12 or 13, Steve was hanging out at the clubhouse and performing in

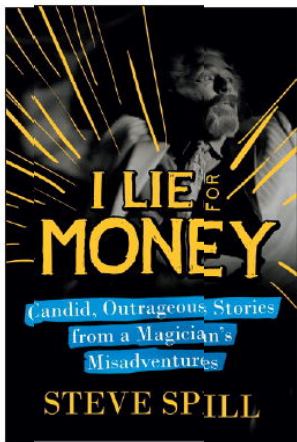


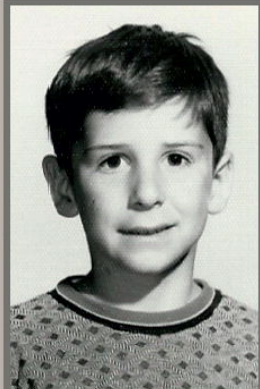


PHOTO BY CHRIS STINNET

With Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade behind him, Steve recollects a 50-year career in magic



Steve Spill's parents, Shirley and Sandy Spillman in a TV press photo



6-year-old Steve Spillman



The magical Spillmans appear in an industrial film



Dai Vernon and Steve

the Close-Up Gallery. "I was one of a group of kids who hung out there. We were sort of The Magic Castle's 'Brat Pack.' On Sundays nights we were allowed to perform, we worked for free, of course, but these were priceless learning opportunities for all of us." By age 14, Steve had a 20-minute close-up show.

The Magic Castle proved to be a graduate school of magic for Steve. Over the years he spent time with Dai Vernon, Charlie Miller, Francis Carlyle, Kuda Bux, and many others. "I was doing some pretty high-end sleight of hand with cards by the time I was in my mid-teens." He would spend his afternoons in the old third-story library reading and practicing. "I could smell the cigar smoke from the night before when Vernon, Charlie, Francis, and Kuda were up there playing cards."

Many in the Castle's self-described "Brat Pack" were also part of a group called the Young Sorcerers' Association. They gathered at Joe Berg's Hollywood magic shop. "I met Paul Harris there," recalls Steve. "He was a member of the YSA. We had some adults around—their group was called the Magic Dungeon Society—and they acted as our advisors. Bill Taylor and Bob Wagner were a part of that group that fed our magic brains with new ideas."

Throughout his teens, Steve was working everywhere he could and, instead of listening to his teachers during the day, he was busy thinking up magic tricks and jokes. "Any possible way to get

out there and do magic for people, I was doing it. And I was determined to do it to make a living. That part didn't thrill my mom," says Steve.

Bill Larsen, Jr. came upon Steve studying in The Castle's upstairs library, just down the hallway from his office. It was 1969 and Steve was looking for a new piece of standup magic to do at a Cub Scout show. Larsen recommended he perform a piece of pseudo hypnosis developed by his late father, "Dr. Q's Hypnotic Act." "I needed to update the method a bit. The manuscript was written in 1944 and the method was designed for the stage, not for the Shakey's Pizza Parlor where the scout show was held. I came up with a perfect idea, did it for the Cubs, and with a few on-the-spot adjustments, it worked like a charm." Not only was Steve performing magic, he was learning how to develop his own routines as well as methods. "In regard to effect, I stand on the shoulders of giants," he explains, "but I always try to go for my own interpretation in presentation, sometimes in method, and occasionally I will create a new effect."

Steve was gaining a reputation around The Magic Castle for having serious chops with a pack of cards. With Dai Vernon and Charlie Miller confirming his bone fides, the next generation of card men, like Bruce Cervon, Mike Skinner, and Larry Jennings, often shared their work with the younger man. "I have a vivid memory of Jennings teaching me his famous Ace Assembly on the hood of his plumber's truck. No close-up mat or anything; just on the hood of his truck. The man was incredible." He is also proud that he baffled the legendary card man with some work of his own. "I could make a selected card appear beneath my shoe. It completely fooled him. I was so skinny that I was able to drop the selection all the way down my pants. It fell out under cover of my bell-bottoms and I just moved my foot over it. Fooled the hell out of him. Of course, he would never have been able to do it any more than I can do it these days. My waist size has changed a bit."

In 1973, at age 18—so technically still underage—Steve Spillman began working full weeks with pay at The Magic Castle. "Seven days a week, three shows a night," recounts Steve. "I did that up to four times a year." It wasn't long before Dai Vernon gave Steve his current surname.

"The Professor had a nickname for me, 'Spill,' short for my real last name, Spillman. He affectionately said he dropped the 'man' because I was a boy magician. Spill. Vernon called me that,

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“Spill,” short for my real last name, Spillman. He affectionately said he dropped the “man” because I was a boy magician. Spill. Vernon called me that, boy and man, all his life. The nickname stuck and eventually became my legal name. Funny, when Vernon first called me a boy magician, I felt like a man.

boy and man, all his life. The nickname stuck and eventually became my legal name. Funny, when Vernon first called me a boy magician, I felt like a man. Now, as a 60-year-old magician, I feel like a boy.” Dai Vernon liked Steve, mentioned him often in his “Vernon Touch” column in *Genii*, and was among the few people who believed Steve would eventually be a successful fulltime magician.

At age 17 he published his first book, *My Hands Can be Yours* (Magic Limited, 1973) under the name Steve Spillman. “The title was Lloyd Jones’ idea, not mine. It still makes me cringe.” Charlie Miller wrote the introduction.

Only a year after *My Hands Can be Yours*, Steve’s second book—also under the name Spillman—*Imagine Magic* was published. Unlike his first book, which was dedicated to close-up magic, this one contains a mix of close-up and parlor style magic. It also contained some of his first forays into comedy magic.

“I guess I was about 19 when I finally realized I should be using the name Steve Spill.” He was working sporadically doing close-up magic at private parties, and he would travel to San Francisco and work at Carter’s Magic Cellar, the small magic venue beneath Earthquake McGoon’s, the famous jazz club owned by Turk Murphy and Pete and Cedric Clute. “I met Harry Anderson there, and worked at the same time as Pete Biro, Martin Lewis, and a great young card guy, Matt Corin.”

In Los Angeles, he started doing open mic nights at all the local clubs. “Some of these places were so small that the audience was made up of the other performers waiting to go on.” At first he wasn’t making money—like a lot of the musicians just trying to get noticed—including when he started working the legendary Monday Night Hootenanny at Doug Weston’s Troubadour. But the money, such that it was, started to come in along with bookings.

The rock clubs were where he more fully developed the standup style of magic and comedy that he is known for. He was opening for bands like The Flying Burrito Brothers (with former member of The Byrds Gram Parsons and future Eagle Bernie Leadon), Neil Young and Crazy

Horse, The Eagles, Little Feat, Cheap Trick, and many others. “By then I was a paid performer, though it wasn’t a lot of money. \$15 or \$20 a night. Rock clubs really didn’t budget for a magician.” But Steve and his act were a perfect fit for the “counter culture”: “I called myself ‘Highdini’ and a lot of my magic was drug oriented. I would produce a pot bush and then make it disappear in a puff of smoke. And I did the ‘Long Salt Pour,’ except I didn’t call the white powder ‘salt.’” A large spoonful of the illicit powdered drug instantly disappeared up his nose. “It was a big paddle trick,” he explains. “Then I would grab my nose and the powder would start to pour out. Like the classic trick, it lasted forever, this long stream of ‘cocaine’ pouring from my nose. The audiences of the time ate it up, of course.” How, some might ask, does a teenager work in adult



Bob Sheets and Steve



nightclubs? "It was the '70s. I'd arrive early when the bands, which often included underage players, did sound checks. I don't remember anyone ever being carded in those days. I guess no one cared; yet."

A product of the times, Steve experimented with drugs and alcohol but his views on substance use today is eloquently expressed in *I Lie For Money*: "A quick word to my younger readers: in the long run, there are three types of people who can't handle constant drugging, drinking, and smoking—magicians, comedians, and everybody else."

When disco began to overtake the rock scene in Los Angeles, the rockers moved to the clean air and freewheeling area of Aspen, Colorado. Steve followed. Highdini stayed behind. "Though that's not to say that my four years in Aspen weren't wild. It was." The now 21-year-old went to work at Bob Sheets' magic bar, The Jolly Jester.

A year earlier, Sheets had started working at John Denver's Tower Bar and Restaurant in Snowmass Village. His popularity grew and he decided that he could open his own bar in Aspen, about 10 miles from Snowmass. His instincts, that the two ski resort towns could support two magic bars, was proven correct. For Steve it was a new style of magic and another lesson that would help him grow in his chosen profession. "You can't help but learn a lot spending eight hours a night behind a bar, doing magic for people whose inhibitions have disappeared along with the alcohol. Because the crowd would change several times a night, I was doing my set 50 times a week. And of course I learned a lot from Bob. I owe Bob a lot." The constant work wasn't drudgery.

"That period was crazy. The best stuff that can see print is in my book, crazy and insane. A number of well-known names of the time got into the spirit of the place and surprised us. Buddy Hackett, Ted Kennedy, Cheech & Chong, Jimmy Buffet, Hunter Thompson, Farrah Fawcett. In those days, before cell phone cameras, tabloid TV, and the internet. Bob and I often witnessed the questionable, inappropriate, and embarrassing antics of captains of industry, movie actors, and sports stars."

Steve developed a lot of his close-up signature magic at The Jester. One of those is his rendition of The Bill in Lemon. Steve spent immea-

surable time researching, constructing, and deconstructing various methods of the routine, including Emil Jarrow's original version, even though it was unpublished at that time. Steve was 15 when Vernon described how The Lemon Trick looked, he didn't tell him how it was done. The Professor gave hints, but no directions.

"The Professor said to me, 'Steve you're a very clever boy, it'll be good for you to figure it out, you'll come up with something, just don't stop thinking too soon'." It was a challenge Steve was happy to accept. "By 1969 I'd been a student of magic for almost a decade, was a fixture at The Magic Castle for a few years, and being absolutely obsessed with the craft, had seen each and every magician at The Castle perform numerous times, literally dozens of guys, and *not one* of them did The Lemon Trick. So I never saw a properly performed example of how it might look in person. The definitive published authority on magic was the *Tarbell Course*. I went through all five volumes that existed at the time. I found the sections on tricks with paper money. Scarne's Bill Change, Grant's Slow Motion Bill Transposition, LePaul's Torn Bill, Topsy-Turvy Bill; *no Jarrow Bill in Lemon trick!*"

One of his interpretations of the routine appears in print in his third book, the 80-page *The Spill Bar and Grille* (Paul Diamond, 1980). The routine is titled "Ultimate Bill to Lemon." But it turned out not to be his "ultimate" solution.



The Lemon Trick

I felt betrayed, rooked, cheated,

victimized, violated, and should have screamed at the top of my lungs, "Hey, that routine doesn't belong to you to sell, and you know it, and you have no right to do it, cease and desist!"

It was at The Jester that he landed on the streamlined routine that he uses today. It is the final product of continuous trial and error. The routine is specifically designed for attention-span-challenged drinkers. "The stuff I came up with, the bare-hand vanish of a signed bill, the audience holding the knife, the lemon in the bag, and the 'roach clip' [a surgical hemostat], weren't there just for comedy purposes. They are all very much a part of the method and construction of the routine; they have a *purpose*."

An instructional video appeared teaching "Steve Spill's Lemon Trick" but, oddly, it wasn't produced by Steve Spill. Partly from his book, partly not, here's how Steve explains that:

"Near the end of the Jester years, a friend, who was also a bartending magician, asked that I

teach him my Lemon Trick routine. Being unusually charitable about the matter, I did so and it has subsequently been a source of profound regret. Down the road I got a call from this friend, who I had generously taught, for free, who had been making behind-the-bar tips from my gift, and he gave me the somewhat unnerving information that he had taught my routine on an instructional videotape that would be sold to magicians worldwide.

"If he were to tell the truth, I think he would have to agree: He wasn't exactly calling to ask for my permission since the tape had already been made, he wasn't even offering me any compensation. Plus his call was so late in coming that it was obvious he was just attempting to soften the surprise that the video would be released the following week.

"When I demanded to know what he felt gave him the right to sell my routine, his answer was 'It's a cornerstone of my bar show, I've been doing it a long time.' I asked, 'if you sang a Beatles song in your bar show would that entitle you to sell licenses to others to sing that song?' Apparently he could not comprehend the analogy or logic or refused to understand what I was trying to say. 'Don't worry Steve, I gave you complete credit, your name is all over it, it's advertised right on the box as Steve Spill's Lemon Trick!' As if to prove what a super-ethical guy he was, he claimed, he 'almost' called me the night of the filming. But he didn't.

"I felt betrayed, rooked, cheated, victimized, violated, and should have screamed at the top of my lungs, 'Hey, that routine doesn't belong to you to sell, and you know it, and you have no right to

The back row at Magicopolis can see the close-up magic



PHOTO BY CHRIS STINNET

do it, cease and desist!' But I'm ashamed to say I didn't blast him with blazing guns like I would now. I had said what I'd said with my Beatles metaphor and left it at that.

"When I hung up something odd happened. I immediately started feeling guilty that maybe it was entirely my own fault for teaching him in the first place. I started beating myself up about putting so much temptation in the man's way and forcing him to selfishly exploit my work and gift on videotape for his own private gain. It seems to me now, in a long backward glance, absolutely crazy to have blamed myself instead of putting the blame on him where it belonged. I had been robbed.

"An acquaintance of mine, who happens to live near the guy and is one of his best friends, at one point confirmed, 'He just needed to make some money, and felt the end justified the means.' I am not sure that it was so. Some who live by the code of 'the ends justifying the means' find themselves not the beneficiary of the ends, but the victim of those means. After all these years I don't hate the guy and am okay with him on the surface, but there's still a little resentment. "

Of interest to magicians, in the book, Steve provides a dozen fine details that give an insight into the thinking behind each decision he made in crafting the routine—though not any specific methods since *I Lie For Money* is written for the public. Surprisingly, not a single bit of the rationale behind any of these details is shared in the video. Students of magic, who should know the "secrets" to the effect, will find Steve's thinking on the routine enlightening. He dedicates an 11-page chapter to the routine. Like Jim Steinmeyer, he knows that a backstage peek gives non-magician readers an appreciation of the craft while they also think that they are being let in on some big secret when they really aren't.

Like all good things, and good times, everything had to end and by 1980 Sheets and Steve found themselves in Chevy Chase, Maryland. "Aspen was hopping only during the winter and summer," explains Steve. "During the spring, I would go busking around the country." His spring 1976 road odyssey with fellow magician and Renaissance Fair regular Johnny Fox is well chronicled in *I Lie For Money*. "But the fact was that Bob and I wanted something that could go on year-round and that would get us out from behind the bar and on stage."

Sheets joined two other entrepreneurs, Noel Clark and Michael Regan, and invested in a res-



PHOTOS BY CHRIS STINNETT

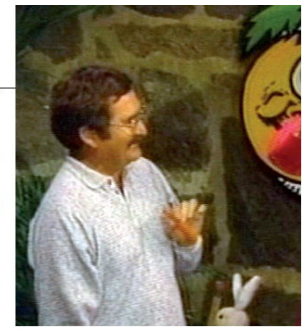
Going ... Gone: The de Kolta Chair

taurant, The Brook Farm Inn. They added magic and created a dinner theater called The Brook Farm Inn of Magic. Steve and Sheets performed a duo comedy magic show—"Magicomedy Cabaret"—after the dessert was served. The place was a near-instant hit, with two-week in advance reservations required. The food consistently received high marks from the local food critics. "We didn't need to advertise a whole lot," says Steve, "We were all over the newspapers, including the *Washington Post*." The show included some character-driven magic skits, usually around large-scale illusions like the Levitation and Substitution Trunk; something Steve would carry well into a future he could not have imagined.

Patrons could choose from four entrees, enjoy a multi-course meal, all the while enjoying the



Above: At a comedy club, Steve produces a barbecued bunny, swallows needles, and shows us how to get blood from a stone



close-up magic of Tim Conover, David Williamson, Eddie Goldstein, and John Kennedy who worked the tables before the main show. There was also a separate bar that featured Scotty York, which would prove popular one Saturday a month when the main room was dedicated to a kids' only day. They were plied with all-you-can-eat pizza and spaghetti, bottomless sodas and "no parents allowed." The kids were in complete control while their parents enjoyed the bar area. Charles Zuis, as "Chazoo," joined Sheets in a kid-centric magic and comedy show.

At the time, Sheets and Steve honestly believed that they were the only male magic duo, outside of Las Vegas's Siegfried and Roy, working. It was 1981 when Penn & Teller, who were working at a local Renaissance Fair, stopped by the Brook Farm Inn. A longtime friendship between Steve, Sheets, and magic's "Bad Boys" was struck.

The successful run of the inn came to an end in 1985. Sheets and Steve went their separate ways. The comedy club circuit was flourishing around the country and Steve's brand of comedy magic was a natural in the

small rooms with exposed brick walls. Unlike prop comedians, who worked out of big trunks filled with stuff, Steve truly had a "packs small, plays big" act. "When I got my first stand-up gigs, I started searching for stuff that looked big but really wasn't. It was also great if it was inexpensive to make. So I had been working out of a box for a long time and it came in handy during my rock club days," says Steve. "In those clubs, there was no time to preset a table or clean up when you were done. You walked on, did your act, you walked off. All I needed was a barstool and those were easy enough to find around the clubs. 'Highdini' had an old wooden Anheuser Busch beer bottle crate; the kind with a lid. I also worked out of a hat box at one time; all kinds of boxes over the years. I never saw anyone else do

it, it was just the best solution to the 'I can't use a preset table' problem. So once I started working the comedy clubs, the box for my stuff was already a well-established part of my act."

It was during his vacations to L.A. from Aspen and then Maryland that he first started working a new comedy club; the Comedy & Magic Club in Hermosa Beach, California. "So I was able to mix seeing my family with a week-long gig in Hermosa, and I would also work a week in the new Palace of Mystery at The Magic Castle." When he moved back to L.A. in 1985, because he had been working in Hermosa, he was already a known commodity among the bookers at all the new comedy clubs that had sprung up in town. It was fairly easy for him to get work, and those clubs with venues around the U.S. and Canada had him on the road.

During that period he further developed his working repertoire of signature routines including the "Exploding Bunny," "Grab & Stab," "Blood from Stone," and "Geyser, the Mindreading Goose," and he would close his set with his strong version of "The East Indian Needle Mystery" (the latter three he would eventually market). "The comedy clubs gave me the opportunity to work out new material. You can't do that if you're doing a corporate gig or working a casino showroom. At a club, you have a tried and true opener and closer, but in between you can work in the new stuff."

Because Steve was beginning to appear on some television shows, "Geyser the Mindreading Goose" became what he was best known for inside the magic community. But Steve was primarily working for the general public, not magicians. "Early on I was known among magicians because a few of the older guys around The Castle blabbed about me and in 1973 I performed and lectured at the PCAM convention in Hawaii and Tannen's Jubilee in New York. But I learned pretty quickly that performing for magicians was not the direction I wanted to go." He details his thinking in *Lie For Money*: "My expenses were covered, but unfortunately recognition, adulation, and money, don't always come together. My show and lecture were received well, but the applause was not bankable. The way magician's magicians make money at a magic convention is to have a ton of stuff that all the attendees want to buy. I was ill equipped in that department. As I bowed to the



Steve and Geyser the Clairvoyant Goose



clapping, I thought, if each of you would just throw me a few dollars, I could get my car fixed."

The comedians Steve encountered, and even roomed with at a club's accommodations ("comedy condos") is a who's who of comic legends, including Jay Leno (pre-*Tonight Show*), Jerry Seinfeld, Garry Shandling, Bill Hicks, David Spade, Dennis Miller, and Steven Wright. "I first met Steven at Finney Bones in Phoenix," recalls Steve, speaking about fellow magic comedian Michael Finney's Arizona comedy club. "He was already in the 'big time.' He had a hit record and had done his own special on HBO. But, like the rest of us, he was at a small, local club working out new material; something he cannot do on an HBO comedy special."

1987 found Steve in Lake Tahoe, Nevada at Harrah's performing in Dick Foster's magical revue, *Spellbound*. The show also starred illusionists Mark Kalin, Tim Kole and Tamara Frye, and Roy Shank. "I started as a fill-in when the show was at Knott's Berry Farm, and also appeared in the production at the Wild Coast Sun Casino and Resort in South Africa. That was an incredible experience." In *I Lie For Money*, besides amusing tales of a death-defying plane ride (because of an unhappy—and loose—tiger cub) and panther urine drenched assistants, he writes in detail about an accidental meeting between himself, one of the show's dancers, and the inhabitants of a secluded village; a place not on any map, which can be a dicey proposition in the wilds of Africa. "They were incredible people. Some of the elders spoke English, so we could communicate. I did some sleight-of-hand magic and the tribal witchdoctor took notice. I offered him a magic book I happened to have in our car. He declined it, noting that it had nothing in it that he couldn't learn from 'the moon, the heavens, the deepest jungle, the sun and the rains.' We returned the next week and did a magic show for the entire village. That one little show was more rewarding to me than any of the nights performing for the high rollers and tourists at the Wild Coast Sun."

Steve Spill is not afraid to experiment. In 1990 he work-shopped a one-man show he wrote called *Magic Trap* which he mounted at the diminutive Celebrity Center Theater in Hollywood. "That may have been my first mistake with that show; the venue. It's in the Scientology building. I'm not

a Scientologist, but the space was available and inexpensive. But you can't put 'Don't worry, I'm not a Scientologist!' on the advertising." That was the least of the issues that he had with the show.

"It was my attempt at a fictionalized semi-autobiographical show," he explains. "I tried a lot of new things. It was half-baked, and only half worked." He felt that he had the club circuit "wired" so he wanted to branch out and try something outside his comfort zone. The stage set included a bar, though he never worked behind it during the show. A television monitor, with which he interacted with videos, was also on the otherwise sparse stage. "I learned a lot from that experience, especially that standup and acting are two different skills and I'm better at the former than the latter." Steve understands that, as a magician, there is some acting involved. "I know that when I say something is what it actually isn't, and I am convincing an audience of that untruth, I am 'acting.' But it is not the same thing as creating a believable character; one whose stories carry the weight of fact, even when the stories are fictionalized. I do not have the skillset to pull that off. *Magic Trap* needed an actor to work on that stage."

He closed the show with a blackout sketch around the Bullet Catch. After explaining the grim history of the routine, he brought a marksman onstage who had a loaded revolver. He explained that he would catch the fired bullet in his teeth. The shooter took aim and fired. Steve threw his hands to his face and fell to floor as the stage lights went out. A terrified voice is heard screaming, "Oh no!"

A moment later, the television flickered to life. A previously recorded video of Steve appears, noting that, since he had never done the bullet catch before, he wanted to record his thanks to



Steve in a village in Africa

My vanity was tickled with a thousand feathers when she spoke my name. Before her accent became a little more Americanized, instead of Steve, when she said my name it sounded like 'Stiff!' Everyone within earshot always thought I was a real stud muffin, which I was perfectly willing to accept."

the audience in case it didn't work. The show closed with Steve's words of wisdom regarding success and failure: "I just think it's better to fail at something you love, than to succeed at something you hate. That's it. Take it easy, everybody. Thank you. Good night."

The decade of the 1990s kicked off with Steve costarring in the CBS TV special, *World's Greatest Magicians... At the Magic Castle*. Hosted by then TV sitcom star Peter Scolari (a fan of magic and a fine juggler), the show also featured the magic of Jonathan Neal Brown, Lance Burton, Scott Cervine, Rudy Coby, Brian Gillis, Goldfinger and Dove, Kevin James, Paul Kozak, Tina Lenert, Johnny Ace Palmer, and Mark Sweet.

Steve wasn't wild about the fact that they edited out Geysler the goose's peeing gag, a visually inoffensive bit of comedy—a stream of water coming out of an obviously fake goose—that ties the other comedy bits into a neat package. He says, "Without it, I felt like my goose had been flambéed. I didn't know it until the show aired. I was disappointed."

Not long after the show aired, its producer, Troy Miller, hired Steve as a magic consultant for a short film called *Dr. Goldfarb Physician-Magician*. It was a show within a show broadcast on the then young FOX network. It gave him the opportunity to ask Miller what happened to the pee. Miller told him that the cut was made because it was a "violation of a thing called CBS standards and practices."

Among the magic Steve consulted on the FOX show was a shot of the Dr. Goldfarb pulling a string of credit cards from a patient's backside. So he casually asked Miller, "How could that air but pee couldn't?" Miller answered honestly, explaining that the concept at the FOX network was to air content one could normally only see on cable.

Spill continued working clubs, casino showrooms, and corporate dates. "In 1990, shortly after wrapping my engagement with Brett Daniels in a revue show called *Kazzamm* at the Normandie Casino in Gardena, California, I was out of work with nothing on the immediate horizon. I knew I could bounce back, but I had to figure out how. The solution was to continue my employment with the Normandie, a stable well-paying orga-

nization. The problem was, they weren't offering me another job. Well, I came up with an idea I thought was an absolutely brilliant way to create a little work for myself."

Steve's idea: As a goodwill gesture, the casino sponsors him to do his one-man show several times a week around southern California at various organizations that fit the demographics of those that frequented the casino. Audience members get a voucher redeemable for chips in the casino. The casino went for a 10-week test. Casino executives monitored Steve's progress, the shows were well received and thousands of casino vouchers were distributed. But only nine of those vouchers brought new players into the casino. The program was a complete failure, but Steve says, "The casino was okay with the experiment and didn't get too upset."

And he dabbled on the fringes of the magic community. A video, *The Steve Spill Video Scrap Book* was released to critical acclaim. It contained video of many of his famous pieces, but had no explanations. He also appeared with Bob Sheets at a convention in North Carolina geared toward comedy magic. "It was billed as the Reunion of the Brook Farm Inn Magicians." He was on the cover of the June, 1991 issue of *Genii*, and the accompanying article was a conversation between his right brain and left brain. Steve wrote both parts of the article.

Another video, *Hokum and Hype*, was released (it had some explanations on it) and, with his friend, superb magician and mechanical genius John Kennedy, released his "Voodoo Doll." Steve's other marketed originations include his Mindreading Goose and Needles routine put out with Bob Kohler, the "Eye Popper" put out by Kevin James, and his "Blood From Stone." One has to wonder why he'd market these signature effects.

Steve says the answer is simple. "I did those bits for 25 years. I'm a different person now, older, grayer, wider. I used to be the guy with the goose. Now I'm not. But looking at his pictures now I see he was quite cute. Sometimes I have to pretend to be him, and if need be I can still do all that old material, but I'm clearly a totally different person now."

Steve Spill was living the dream. Working when and where he wanted; and he worked a lot. "I lived in Santa Monica, but I was rarely there." While on an airplane a germ of an idea popped into his head. It was a way to stay at home but still perform magic. Doubts pushed the thought aside, but not for long. He began to envision a theater, built specifically for magic. Every seat a good one. And the audiences came there to see *him* do magic. He even came up with a name—a made up name—but an original one: Magicopolis. "Unfortunately 'The Magic Castle' was taken."

More doubts, questions, the voices in his head urging caution, the others shoving the doubts away with audacity. The plan was formulated and he began to put it in place. First, the space. He briefly flirted with an existing space in the Gas Lamp Quarter of San Diego. It was a brief flirtation. Home, Santa Monica, was the seductress. A former video and music store in the building that was once the Santa Monica City Hall complex. An art deco "tower"—by 1920s standards; the building is just a few stories high. Sturdy, able to be completely gutted and rebuilt. Shaped into his vision.

Then the money, a seven-digit figure would be required. That meant investors. Non-showbiz types only. Business professionals, doctors, and lawyers with money they could—and would—risk on a wild and wonderful idea. A haircut. Offices and suits. A glossy, well-put together proposal with all the numbers; costs, profit projections, plus all of legal jargon required by the government. "Since I don't have amazing psychic abilities, there was no way to predict who might come through for me so I told everybody who would listen about my brilliant idea for a kick-ass magic theater." It was beginning to get real. His life was definitely going to change.

Steve's life did change, but in an unexpected way. He met the woman who would become his wife, Bozena Wrobel. He recounts the moment in his memoir: "That night she was celebrating her birthday at Igby's, a West L.A. comedy club. My act had gone well, and when I came off stage I saw her at the bar, she was smiling at me. She looked as though she could give a man something that he needed to quiet his soul and soothe his body. I was saying inside myself, I am incomplete. She would make me complete. I wonder ...

"Then Bozena opened her mouth and began talking in her own peculiar brand of broken English, a great belly laugh came out of me. It's



PHOTO BY CHRIS STINETT

The Baffling Bozena (Bozena Wrobel)

hard to make me laugh. I observe, I smile, but when I'm really amused you can hear me a block away. My vanity was tickled with a thousand feathers when she spoke my name. Before her accent became a little more Americanized, instead of Steve, when she said my name it sounded like 'Stiff!' Everyone within earshot always thought I was a real stud muffin, which I was perfectly willing to accept."

Bozena grew up under communism in Poland. A talented, classically trained actress and writer, she came to the United States in 1995 for an acting job. With Poland no longer under the iron grip of the Soviet Union, an American appliance manufacturer was making an infomercial to sell their products there. She was able to get a green card and she stayed. In America, she was working in television doing small parts in sitcoms and dramas playing the clichéd ditzy Polish (or Russian) "hot chick" or spy. In Poland she had been doing serious work, including the popular mini-series *The Decalogue*, directed by Academy Award nominated director, Krzysztof Kieślowski. "She listened to my ideas about Magicopolis. I took



Steve and Bozena: An early photo of the theater at Magicopolis

her to the space and together we spray-painted on the floor where the walls and stage would be. She was truly my partner.”

They were married the following January, again perhaps fittingly, in a drive-through Las Vegas wedding chapel. Their reception was held at the Jack in the Box next door. “It really was a romantic weekend,” Steve assures us. “We planned on having a ‘real’ ceremony at the theater once it was open, we’ve just never gotten around to doing it.” Steve also had not gotten around to telling his sister of the marriage since they were planning a classic style wedding for family and friends. “When news of Magicopolis started hitting the newspapers, there was an *L.A. Times* article with a picture of Bozena and me, and the caption said, ‘Steve Spill and his wife Bozena.’ That was how my sister found out I was married.”

The official groundbreaking for Magicopolis took place on March 25, 1998. There was a full contingent of press, the mayor of Santa Monica, Robert Holbrook, was there and declared “Magicopolis Day.” The official proclamation certificate hangs in the lobby of the theater.

The other luminaries there for that important day were Steve’s friends, Penn & Teller. Steve introduced them by pointing to a faux brick wall. “There was a puff of smoke, a cymbal clash, and like cartoon characters, the duo burst through the wall leaving holes, exactly the same shapes as themselves, like silhouettes.” After Penn’s speech, the pair placed their hands, feet, and signatures in wet cement in the floor. The party over, the work began.

The 150 seat theater is wide and shallow, with steeply raked seats, making the sightlines excellent for magic. “No matter where you sit, you can see the performer on stage from head to toe. That was important to me after years of working in clubs, rooms, and even theaters where after the third row all anyone can see is the performer from the chest up.”

Steve took a page from the Milt Larsen Book of Construction and looked for surplus fixtures to complete the interior work. He acquired the theater’s near-century old seats—originally in an Orpheum theater and then a monastery—some magic-themed stained glass, and various bits of

antique hardware, old wood, two Dutch street lamps, and other building materials that provides Magicopolis with its eclectic character.

The magic-themed stained glass was originally in a nearby single's bar called Merlin McFly's. The images were based on the classic posters of Houdini, Kellar, Thurston, Alexander, Blackstone, Chung Ling Soo, and the bar's namesake, Merlin McFly. Steve acquired them along with the double doors that now lead to his theater. They feature spooky spider webbed stained glass and top-hatted skeletons peering around the door frames. One of the knobs is reportedly from Houdini's Los Angeles area mansion.

In 2004, Steve was coerced into selling those panels to a collector who put them in a Washington, D.C. museum. "I loved the windows, but they weren't selling any tickets to my show and the offer was a lucrative one that couldn't be refused. I kept the skeleton doors which were my favorite of the lot." He subsequently replaced the panels with replica three-sheet posters from Keller, Carter, Alexander, Chang, and Ionia. "I got the images from the Library of Congress and had a sign company make them. They look a million times better than the stained glass."

To great fanfare and media coverage, Magicopolis opened its doors on the evening of Friday September 18, 1998. Bob Sheets, Bob Kohler, Alfonso, and Michael Forbes delighted the crowd with close-up magic. The cameras of the local print and television press, including all of the major network affiliates, were busy. With many celebrities in attendance, it was an event. Media coverage included *Entertainment Tonight*, the national TV entertainment magazine. Its host, Julie Moran, participated in the opening by introducing the venue's impresario to the overflow audience.

Steve took to the stage, welcomed everyone, and then it was on with the show. Bob Sheets and Nicholas Night & Kinga performed and the headliners were Penn & Teller. From *I Lie For Money*: "[They] performed a selection of my personal favorites from their voluminous repertoire of mind-bending greatest hits. Strangling an innocent boy who [is] left unharmed due to his belief in Teller's ability to perform religious miracles, Penn playing bass while Teller exposed the complex modus operandi behind what looked like a simple cigarette trick, Teller accidentally impaling Penn's hand with a buck knife to reveal a selected card, and a plethora of other daring provocative, refreshing entertainments."

Over the next 18 months Steve put his own



PHOTO BY CHRIS STINNETT

The Costume Trunk

performing on the back burner while he jiggled the business side of the operation into order. Besides Sheets and the Nights, other great performers took the stage such as Jeff McBride, Rudy Coby, The Hamners, Scott & Jenny Alexander, and Larry Wilson.

On any given night, the theater is filled with everyone from families to swinging singles, couples, senior and tour groups, bachelorette parties, birthdays, anniversaries, tourists, and locals. As the patrons start coming in—the doors open well before the 8 o'clock show time, the evening often starts with Steve pitching magic at the small magic counter in the front corner of the building, near where Penn & Teller's immortalized hand and footprints reside.

He starts with a set of sleight-of-hand reminiscent of his days at The Jolly Jester. Several card tricks later, he is pitching Svengali Decks, Cups and Balls, and several other tricks that the youngsters, and the young at heart, might consider buying. Next to the magic counter is a concession stand where typical theater snacks like popcorn, candy, and soft drinks are available. The box office, where reservations and tickets are handled, is in the center of the lobby. On the other side of the building, the bar is hopping with adults choosing from several types

The doors leading into the theater



PHOTO BY CHRIS STINNETT

of beer and wine for before and during the show. If they notice, there is an illusion on full display across from the bar.

The walls leading to the theater are adorned with many photos of Steve posing with celebrity visitors, and there is a space dedicated to Penn & Teller that includes the faux brick wall that the two stepped through on day of the groundbreaking.

PHOTO BY CHRIS STINNETT



The Three Leaf Repeat

Steve's show, costarring his wife, The Baffling Bozena, is called *Escape Reality*. "The show is tailored for the mixed audiences that we get here. And it is much bigger than a space this size could support if it was just coming in for a week or two." The point being, because of the large scale illusions, lighting, sound, and all of the other elements, a traveling illusion and magic show like his would not be profitable in a 150-seat space with tickets selling at the rates he currently charges. "The show is installed, so it's cost effective."

The show, which runs 90 minutes to two hours, is a mix of small stage magic and grand illusion. Steve opens the show with his signature "Linking Finger Rings." (Note that it is not the "Himber Rings"—that gimmick is nowhere to be found in his *unique method*.) And he also sits at the

center-stage steps and performs close-up magic on a small tabletop that he places on his lap. It is a marvelous sleight-of-hand routine with silver dollars. And because of the design of the theater, even those sitting in the back row can easily see the magic unfolding beneath his hands as the coins vanish, reappear, and gather.

With one exception, the illusions are all presented as skits, and they are all humorous, very much like Steve and Bob Sheets did back in the Brook Farm Inn. Even his beautiful levitation with Bozena is centered on a comic premise. Other

illusions include The Squisher, a Thin Sawing, the Costume Trunk (that ends with a Card Sword that fits in perfectly with the premise), and a fast DeKolts Chair with Bozena reappearing—with a costume change—in the back of the theater, even to the surprise of magicians in the audience. "I said that I designed this theater specifically for the performance of magic," emphasizes Steve.

Bozena performs several solo pieces, and takes full advantage of her Polish accent to great comedy effect. Steve also does several smaller pieces including his unique "Three Leaf Repeat" followed by a Miser's Dream with a youngster from the audience (where he is cleverly able to get the kid to clean up all the leaves spread around the stage).

The show includes a short intermission where the guests are able to replenish their drinks and refreshments, and the magic counter is also open. The second half of the show has a slightly faster pace and includes an opportunity to see Steve in drag; a vision that remains for some time. The show closes on a dramatic note with his presentation of Andre Kole's "Table of Terror."

"I had the prop made for this space. It is as big as it can be and weighs a ton." When the spikes drop, the impact is visceral; the audience can feel it. "It does scare some kids, and I have had some parents take their little ones out of the theater beforehand." He meets and greets the audience after every show, something he has done for most of his career. "If I meet a kid that was frightened I tell them that I was completely safe and we just wanted to have a dramatic finish like a movie."

Magicopolis is approaching the completion of its 17th full year of operations this September 18. There are still a few magicians spreading rumors that Steve has a rich aunt or a secret Swiss bank account that keeps the venue afloat, proving that behind every successful venture is a group of baffled cynics. "I hear these things and I still can't believe it," he says. "At one point there was a guy at The Castle telling folks Magicopolis is a money laundering front for organized crime."

The fact is that Magicopolis is self-sufficient and makes money selling tickets to magic shows. "I was lucky when I started pitching investors because magic was *booming*. Copperfield and Siegfried & Roy were on the Forbes top earners list, Wizardz at Universal Studios Hollywood and Caesar's Magic Empire were under construction, *The World's Greatest Magicians*, Rudy Coby, *Champions of Magic* and Penn & Teller TV specials were happening and Lance Burton had just signed his 100 million dollar contract with the

Monte Carlo. That was all part of the pitch that I made to investors, who have long ago been bought out."

Magicopolis is open every day. The magic shop hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, and shows open to the public are Friday at 8 p.m., Saturday at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m., and Sunday at 2 p.m. Monday through Thursday shows are performed for corporate events, fundraisers, and other private functions. Being just a block away from Santa Monica's popular Third Street Promenade, curious walk-ins and potential customers are constantly touring the facility. "They are often surprised to discover that there is a magic theater here."

Many of his memories are recounted in his new autobiography, *I Lie For Money*. Which, perhaps fittingly, happened by a combination of good timing and happenstance. "The Santa Monica Museum of Art had an exhibit about how various artists viewed the craft of performing magic. There were sculptures, paintings, installations ... The centerpiece was an immersive 360-degree film loop featuring Greg Wilson—Mark's son—dressed in Victorian garb pulling a rabbit from a hat. As part of the ongoing festivities I was asked to give a speech about my 'journey' as a magician. That talk started me putting my memories on paper, later some of them were formulized into little articles that were printed in The Magic Castle newsletter and Paul Romhany's online magazine, *Vanish*."

"A comedy writer friend of mine got a book deal with Skyhorse Publishing. We were talking about something and I said that reminds me of one of the magic articles I wrote, so I sent him a link. The next time we spoke he asks me, 'Have you ever thought about writing a book?' I said "yeah, sure." He sent a few of my articles to his editor and I got a deal. It took nine months to write the book, the last several weeks working with an editor to trim my 89,000 words down to a comfortable breezy 60,000 word read."

The book will be in stores May 12 of this year and is available for presale discount now on Amazon. "It's the most badass book about being a magician ever written," says Steve with all humility. "If the book is successful I'd like to write a sequel called *The Truth About My Tricks and Other Lies*." What Steve doesn't know is that this author has already pinched its title for this piece. Of course, he's used to other people using his best lines. •

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