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BEN ULIN

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BEN ULIN

SUSTAINED SUCCESS

By Craig Beytien

Anyone can have an idea, vision, or dream, but it takes effort and commitment to turn it into reality. Talent gives you a head start, but hard work and persistence finishes the race. Career magician Ben Ulin embodies both talent and dedication, and he's going strong at running his race. He has been the featured performer at Adventureland Park in Des Moines, Iowa, since 1988. This is Ben's thirty-second year of continuous performance.

Early Years

Ben Ulin, an Iowa native, doesn't remember seeing any live magic performances as a child. His family moved near a library in the early 'sixties, and he discovered magic books there. Around age nine, he bought a Svengali Deck from a pitchman at the Iowa State Fair. While sitting on a nearby bench to look them over, he removed the cards from the box, balanced the deck on his leg, and read through the scant instructions. Unfortunately, the deck fell and scattered on the ground. He puzzled over the mix of random and duplicated cards and thought he had broken the deck. It took him a week to figure out how to use it.

Ben recalls gathering all the neighborhood kids for his first magic show in his living room. A magic book from the library had suggested putting on a show. He charged everyone a nickel. His first effect was supposed to be the appearance of an egg from behind the ear of a volunteer and the disappearance of that egg in a puff of confetti. It didn't go as expected. He used

a blown egg filled with confetti. Ben was fascinated by the concept of a blown egg and felt he had stumbled onto one of magic's deep dark secrets. The book described hiding the prepared egg in your hand and then calling up a volunteer. Noticing something behind her ear, you were to reach out and reveal the egg, secretly crushing it to release the confetti inside. In his excitement, he crushed the egg too early. After a moment's hesitation, he simply threw the confetti into the air and said, "Welcome to the show!" Not an auspicious beginning to his performing career, but it was memorable, nonetheless.

In high school, he took a job working in a magic shop that had recently opened in a Des Moines shopping mall. That's where his interest in becoming a career performer began. It was originally named the J & W House of Magic and was owned by local magicians, John Lohner and Walter Brown. After hiring a corps of young employees, the name was changed to the Five Sons Magic Shop. Ben managed this shop for a couple of years. He, Bill Trotter,



Ben Ulin.

Terry Sangrene, and a frequent customer, magician Steve Daly, became lifelong friends.

Developing Skills

No one person was a mentor to Ben. He learned from everyone. The owners of the magic shop insisted that he learn and demonstrate the Linking Rings, Sponge Balls, and Chop Cup for customers. As a beginner, Ben was uncomfortable with these effects, but with time his confidence grew. Later, Ben joined I.B.M. Ring 167, which hosted several semi-professional members who did funny, character acts. They inspired Ben to see that magic could be theater and not just tricks. Eventually he

fell in with a group of young comedians. Hanging with them was like working out at a comic gymnasium. These relationships helped him to break away from traditional thinking about magic and be fearless with his own sense of humor.

For his first gig outside his home a magic shop customer asked him to perform at a birthday party. His early repertoire included the What's Next? (Spot Card), the Acrobatic Silks, and an eight-ring Linking Ring routine.

Beginnings at Adventureland

Ben's position at Adventureland Park began with a telephone call offering him a job. It wasn't any more dramatic than



Ben with his current assistants, Amy Nichols (left) and Lindsay Mickelson (right) in a 2018 photo.

that. The managers had become aware of his act when companies had hired him to perform at private functions at the Adventureland Park and Hotel. He didn't think to approach the park on his own because he was busy appearing at comedy clubs and company functions as a solo performer working out of a bag. A few years before, he had performed with an assistant and some homemade illusions, so he had a tiny bit of experience with a larger show, but that was all.

Ben recalls, "I was doing a solo act at comedy clubs and private events, so I was confident of my material going in, but I was surprised to find that my honed routines really seemed to fall flat at the park. I didn't realize that the audiences simply do not have much investment in the shows. You are not the main reason they came to the park, and sometimes your theater is

just a place to sit down and get out of the sun. I was used to getting a lot of laughs and applause. This didn't happen so much at the park. It was quite humbling. I had to stop relying on improvised verbal comedy and the camaraderie of the audiences."

The venue for his show was a two-hundred-fifty-seat theater with a balcony and a food counter called Sheriff Sam's Saloon. It was built for a song and dance show. It had a gaslight, melodrama, and old Wild West feel to it. The western theme of the theater bothered him at first, but the opportunity was too attractive to pass up.

This was before the Internet and online shopping, so finding costumes, music, and stage props was a challenge. The park shows forced him to be resourceful and creative. Over the years Ben has had to adapt his performances to the many physical changes. The evolution and



Adventureland Park Glow Show finale photo with Amy Nichols. This blacklight magic show was introduced in 2012, performed twice daily at Adventureland.

replacement of technology and equipment for sound, lighting, computers, curtains, and much more have changed the design and procedure of the production. In some ways, technological advances make running the show easier to do, but they have also created more complications with respect to scenes and cues.

Creating an Act

When he started performing his show at Adventureland, Ben had to adapt his props and equipment to the new environment. He also had to learn how to control his audience's experience. Now most of his props can be used in a variety of routines and changed to appeal to different types of audiences. His solo show requires no onstage preset and leaves nothing behind. The props are packed tightly and orderly. He learned that he could literally drop-

kick his performing case onto the stage and still perform out of it. Also, for private events, he has become quite insistent about using his own sound system and directing where his act is placed in the room and on the schedule. "I have come to realize," he said, "that I am the expert on how my show works and what it needs to offer the best results for an audience."

Ben rarely performs at magic conventions or shares the stage with other magicians. In the early nineties, however, he entered Larry Wilson's Magical Entertainer of the Year contest, held in conjunction with the New York Symposium in Los Angeles convention. Many of his fellow competitors were rising stars at that time, including Kevin James, Christopher Hart, Amos Levkovitch, and John Carney. Everyone was very friendly. One of the judges was Michael Ammar. He enjoyed

one of Ben's comedy bits so much that he made a point to talk to him and swap ideas about it afterward. Peter Pitt saw him at this competition and hired him to do a week hosting the Palace Theater at the Magic Castle.

One of Ben's most nerve-racking celebrity-magician encounters happened at a Des Moines restaurant where he was doing strolling magic. He was told he was requested at one of the tables. When he turned the corner, it was Harry Blackstone, Jr., and two of the dancers from his show. Ben says, "The dancers had apparently seen me working the night before and had brought Harry in to see me on that night. I'm rarely nervous performing close-up, but I was shaking. Harry was complimentary, but I remember that he pointed out how worn my card boxes looked and said in that big baritone voice, 'Take care of your props, son, and they'll take care of you.'"

TV Star

In 1990, Ben's show at the park caught the eye of the local Fox Television Station. He was hired as the first on-air personality, hosting a show called the *Fox Kids Club*. This involved taping several short vignettes once a week. These ran in-between the cartoon programming every morning and afternoon. It looked like it was taped live, and he had to be creative to achieve that. He was still doing his Adventureland shows throughout the summers and traveling to comedy clubs and company functions the rest of the year. For Ben, *Fox Kids Club* was just a once-a-week job with an occasional live appearance throughout the month. For central Iowa families, though, he seemed to be on television live every day. This show had a huge impact on his local recognition.

A year later, the *Fox Kids Club* program spun into another television project for Ben, a game show called *Family Fun Zone*. This was taped at Adventureland on the Fun Zone outdoor stage which had been constructed specially for the show. It



Ben demonstrates his Linking Ring routine in a recent promotional photo.

was successful enough to continue for the next two years. He was still performing the magic show at Sam's Saloon and would have to run back and forth from theater to theater.

The secret of his long-term success at Adventureland is in part due to Ben's solid relationship with its owner. During the contract negotiations in year ten, the owner looked up from the paperwork and said, "Do you know why you've been here so long?" Ben shook his head. He went on, "To be honest, I forget you're here." It was an odd compliment. The owner explained that his days were filled with all the things that needed to be fixed, replaced, cleaned, reordered, hired, or fired. Ben simply didn't make that list. He was solid, consistent, and did his job as expected. His show always started on time and never led to guest complaints. Evidently, this has been one of the keys to sustaining a long contract.

In 1996, Adventureland moved the magic show into the largest theater at



Ben's children, Bennie and Dymond, in the Sword Basket routine, 2008.

the park. Called *Unbelievable Magic and Mysteries*, this was a much larger show, featuring a cast of nine. The show included a lot of classic magic, including the Assistant's Revenge, Wakeling's Sawing, Asrah Levitation, and the Cannon and Drum Illusion. Ben commented, "Magician Steve Daly (aka Tiny Bubbles) is a lifelong friend who spent many hours helping me with the set design, painting, and inspiration. We couldn't have done it without him." The following year, Adventureland decided to use the big theater exclusively for private events and asked Ben to return to Sheriff Sam's Saloon, the smaller more intimate venue he preferred.

Ben's shows are only twenty to twenty-five minutes long. He has always done two or three different shows throughout the day each year. Some years, he has alternated between a silent show and a standard speaking show. In the beginning, the obvious differences helped repeat guests feel like it was a new show.

Keeping It Fresh

To keep things fresh, Ben has a formula for new material. Every three years, he'll add new illusions and routines. He will

then mix the new with the old. The challenges of selecting new props and routines include the limitations of stage and the return of the same audience. The stage is small with three feet of wing space and no fly area. The physical footprint of each illusion must be small enough to fit into the space. Most of them must be upright cabinets because long table bases don't fit, especially if they need to be spun during the show. The stage is raised, and most of the audience members sit with their eyes at floor level, but there is also a balcony looking down. People can see up underneath the props and down over the top of them. Everything he does must be evaluated carefully with these unusual sight lines in mind.

"The most challenging aspect for me is performing for audiences that return to see the show," says Ben. "I usually poll the audience to find out who has been to the show before, and about fifty percent claim to be regulars who have seen me several times. Imagine how this affects the reactions to routines that count on surprises and jokes. I must choose routines that can stand up to repeated viewings." This has influenced how he presents his illusion routines. He often gives the audience a



Ben Ulin performing his rope routine.

subtle storyline that involves his assistant. He believes this helps the audience relate to the routine as theater.

Performance Persona

Ben avoids referring to himself simply as a magician. For many years, his business card read, "Sort of a Magician." Various reviewers of his show over the years have used two terms to describe him: showman and accessible. "Over time, I have simply become more confident and comfortable as myself while performing," says Ben. Presenting magic as a conversation and not a demonstration has always been his goal.

Assistant Spouse

When the park hired him, Ben asked his girlfriend, Margaret, to work in the show. They became a partnered act. Eventually they married, had two children, bought a house, two cars, and acquired a cat. His wife was invested in the show and handled many of the details. Ben was able to design routines around their relationship and her stunning appearance. After twenty-five years of marriage, the couple divorced. This cast Ben into a new world of hiring assistants and managing everything on his own. The change spurred Ben's creativity as new people brought different skills that he could tap for routine ideas.

"Finding disciplined actors and dancers is the key. They bring an integrity and work ethic that is invaluable when you have an intense daily schedule and spend so much time together," says Ben. His current assistants, Amy Nichols and Lindsay Mickelson, have been with him for seven years and have become like family. Ben finds it rewarding to watch them transform into the magical stars who help to create the applause, laughter, and wonder with each new illusion.

Performing Now vs. Then

Ben contends that many things have changed about magic over time. "Everything is different!" he says. "The act of reading and having to actively imagine actions and scripting is being replaced by passively watching video. Because of this, I think there is less storytelling, and magic has become more focused on visual effect."

Marketing publications used to be very expensive, but the Internet has changed all that. Now beginning performers can represent themselves with professional quality materials long before they become experienced performers.

Ben observes that magic props are becoming more organic and less gaudy and toy-like. Many standard items used in magic in his past are no longer common, such as cigarettes, dollar and half-dollar coins, handkerchiefs, newspapers, and watches. Even the idea of a standardized deck of cards is vanishing. Everyone is using variant and vanity decks which make every deck look showy. Cultural sensitivity is changing the way performers offer ethnic and cultural themes. Comedy is much more challenging as our world tries to determine what is allowed and what is offensive. Due to the success of shows such as *America's Got Talent* and *Penn & Teller: Fool Us* and the demonstrations found on YouTube, Ben suspects magicians are becoming associated more with singular stunts rather than presenters of full-evening shows.



Above: A 1980s promotional photo. Right: Image for Showtime's Funniest Person in America contest, 1986.



A Unique Sub Trunk

Like many, Ben has seen the Substitution Trunk performed by both local magic acts and by prominent magicians. It occurred to him in all these performances that the “magic part” happened in the middle of the routine. The rest of the routine was the not particularly interesting unlocking the box and releasing the person inside. Siegfried and Roy offered a costume change during the exchange and that sparked a funny idea of a male magician switching clothes with his female assistant. This idea sat in his notebook for several years until the job at the park gave him the opportunity to produce the effect. It went through many adaptations of costume and music until he discovered that the clothing exchange alone didn't work well. It had to be the conclusion of a series of mishaps leading up to it. He had a long list of things that could possibly go wrong that he didn't include in his routine. “It is an intense trick to do. The timing of everything puts a lot of pressure on the performers, but it is easily the most satisfying routine I've ever created,” says Ben.

The Future

Ben keeps an ear to the ground, but his vision is focused on his next performance, season by season, year after year. He is healthy, happy, and at the top of his game. He fills the off-season with stand-up shows, corporate gigs, and planning for the next season. Many would like to have such a consistent gig year after year, and Ben takes nothing for granted. He realizes he is fortunate to have this venue in which to perform, create, and entertain. In the meantime, he can feel pride in the fact that it is highly unlikely anyone will ever match his achievement.

Craig Beytien is an avid magic hobbyist and writer. His “Petite Magia” column in The Linking Ring (2017–2019) featured diagrams for building small illusions. He is a builder and originator of several effects produced by his company, Illusion Art Magic. Craig resides in Shullsburg, Wisconsin, with his wife, Kristina, six feral cats, nine chickens, and a long-haired Chihuahua named Lilly. Visit him online at www.illusionartsmagic.com.

MY FRIEND BEN

By Steve Daly



Ben Ulin and I met as young teens. I knew very little about magic other than what I had read in books and seen on TV. But Ben was working in a magic shop at the mall, he was very smart about magic, and I didn't like him at all.

I would come into the shop, point to some packet or box and ask, "What is that?" Ben would invariably take it from the shelf and demonstrate it for me. I would then say, "Wow. How is that done?" He would smile (I always thought it was a smirk), and respond, "It's the secret we sell." Grrr...

This went on for several visits, and each time he would fool me. I grew to loathe the guy I called "that kid behind the counter." (Um...we are the same age.)

I once "invented" a magic trick – which wasn't bad for a young teen growing up on the family farm in the middle of Iowa. My magical invention was a Christmas tree ornament that was simply a glass ball with a clear loop. I placed the loop over my finger, allowing me to hold the ball between my thumb and first finger without exposing the loop. When I flipped my hand up, opening it wide, the ball rolled behind my hand out of sight. In other words, *it vanished!* I could wiggle my fingers and show the ball was gone. With a sharp movement like a karate chop, the ball would roll back up between my thumb and finger to reappear. Clearly, I was a magical genius.

I raced from Altoona, Iowa, to Merle Hay Mall in Des Moines (about a thirty-five-mile drive) to show that "kid" in the shop my new invention. I walked into the magic shop rather smugly and announced I had a trick I wanted to show him. I then performed my miracle flawlessly, if I do say so myself.

Ben stood there and stared at me motionless, expressionless, a perfect Buster-Keaton-dead-pan look on his face. I just smiled and said, "And I am not gonna tell you how I did it – it's the secret I am selling!"

And with that Ben quietly turned around, reached up to a shelf of books, and pulled down one of the Tarbell volumes. He flipped through the pages, and after just a matter of seconds opened to the page he wanted, set the book on the counter, spun it around so I could see it, and softly said, "Like this?"

There, in full black & white glory, was my little ball, the loop, a hand, and the exact movements I had created. My heart sank. This "kid" I detested so much had done it again.

But then Ben smiled at me and said, "Listen, we are *both* magicians. Why can't we be friends?"

I couldn't believe it. This guy was being nice to me? And he's a magician? And he's my age?!

With that, Ben offered to share magical secrets with me. All I had to do was ask. And that started a friendship that has lasted more than forty-five years.

Steve Daly, originally from the Midwest, grew up on the family farm while trying to figure out how to perform the Professor's Nightmare. After eighteen years of touring the USA, Canada, and Mexico with his comedy puppet and magic shows, Steve traveled to Aruba, China, and England to perform. He then moved to Las Vegas, where he has worked as a comedy magician and puppeteer on the Las Vegas Strip for the last twenty-five years in numerous casino showrooms.