PHOTO: RICHARD FAVERTY / BECKETT STUDIOS

By Richard Faverty

"Do you remember Connie Boyd?" someone asks me. I am standing, hungry, in a food line at a holiday party for show people, counting all the magicians ahead of me who are waiting to gobble up the turkey and stuffing — Amazing Johnathan, Peter Studebaker, Arian Black, Murray, Tiny Bubbles, and Sophie Evans, who usually just eats fire.

"Do you remember Connie Boyd?" repeats Joanie Spina, who also stands between me and the platter of turkey. The woman directly in front of me turns around and makes a gesture like she just made an appearance at the end of a Sub Trunk routine. "Oh, my god!" I exclaim, as it turns out to be "the beauty of magic" herself, Connie Boyd.

> "I learned a valuable lesson early on. The pressure is always on you. You are, ultimately, the one responsible and need to know everything about every aspect of your show."

We have not seen each other for almost twenty years. The last time was in Hong Kong, where we were in a cabaret show together. It's funny how certain things stick in your memory. "Remember the first time you did your guitar levitation in Hong Kong?" I ask. "You had your assistant, Paulo, suspended on the end of the guitar and when you flipped the switch to make him slowly revolve, he started spinning really fast — *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh* — like a helicopter blade." The stagehands had somehow managed to plug a 120 motor into a 220 outlet. "In retrospect, that was hilarious," says Connie. "At the time, Paulo was scared to death!"

As we talk some more, I am reminded of her intensity. Her passion for magic is just as strong today as it was twenty years ago.

Connie is Canadian. She studied classical ballet with the National Ballet School of Canada until she got tendonitis at age nineteen. While recuperating, she found an ad for Circus Tivoli, looking for a Canadian girl who would train to be part of their show. She applied for the job and got it. Her plan was to get right back to ballet — which never happened.

"I went to Florida and trained in hand-balancing and adagio. I really worked hard and within a few months I was in the circus, touring Canada. They used me as an advertising hook: 'Canadian girl runs away with the circus!' It worked well for them."

Although no one else in her family is in show business, Connie has always felt a strong attraction to performing. "I have a crazy theory," she says. "I believe there are three types of people in show business: those who get into it for fame, those who do it for the money, and those who perform because it's a calling and it's all they know or want to do; they'll do it whether they get paid or not." Connie falls into that last category. "I've known since I was a little girl that I was going to do this. I didn't have big dreams; I just loved show business." As it turned out, her career has taken her all over the world. "I feel blessed to have been successful! I don't know how to do anything else and I wouldn't *want* to do anything else!"

At Circus Tivoli, she started training in single trapeze and wire-walking. "After I worked a special event with a new up-and-coming juggler, Wally Eastwood, I became his regular assistant. But I wasn't good at it. I would throw the clubs over his head or not far enough. Not helpful! Then, in 1987, we were booked into *Splash* at the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas." That's where the magic began.

Watching every night from backstage as Barclay Shaw did his act, Connie was inspired. "All I wanted, at first, was to be the

girl he levitated. He had the best levitation I have ever seen. Then I decided I was going to do a magic act of my own." Wally was uninterested in doing magic; when he took a gig at the MGM in Reno, Connie decided to go it alone.

Shaw was very supportive and helpful, probably because he got his original inspiration from Cleopatra, a female illusionist he first encountered in Jamaica. "Barclay had no qualms about a woman being a magician. He built a three-way-screen duck production for me out of thin wood and muslin. I still have it. My first performance was in December 1987 at the Riviera Hotel's Christmas show, and Barclay was right there supporting me." Blair Farrington directed and choreographed the show for Connie; it consisted of an appearance from a stack of designer suitcases, a dove production, silk and fantail dove magic, catching doves from the air in a net, doves to rabbit, bunny to boy using a Blammo Box, coin magic and a Coin Ladder, a duck appearance from the screen Barclay built, and a duck vanish.

Connie soon had professional representation from Sal Murillo's Unique Entertainment agency and that is how I first met her. I had a soap-bubble act at the time and Unique Entertainment handled all my bookings around the world. Connie liked my act because it was magical without being magic, and she was instrumental in getting Sal to book me more often. Sal got corporate jobs for Connie and, in mid-1988, he booked her into Genting Highlands in Malaysia for a few months. She put together a new show using some illusions from her first show and some new ones, including the infamous guitar suspension, and a synthesizer-drum-and-drummer levitation with a 360-degree vertical spin.

Preparation for the show was a learning experience for Connie, because the prop builder was not reputable one and the illusions were a disaster. Blair Farrington stepped onto one of the props and fell right through it! "I learned a valuable lesson early on," she says. "You can't trust anyone; not your manager or your consultants. The pressure is always on *you*. You are ultimately the one responsible and you need to know everything about every aspect of your show." She asked other magicians if there was someone who could help her. The answer was Don Wayne, who had been a consultant for David Copperfield. "I had all these illusions that didn't work, and Don saved me!"

Besides Barclay and Don, she also had help from Joanie Spina, Tim White, Shimada, and Daniel Cros, who taught her some close-up. "No one goes it alone," says Connie. "I've had phenomenal help and have been exposed to some of the greatest magicians in the world."

Connie was the first female magician to star in the fabled *Folies Bergere* at the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas where, in 1989, she worked as a sub/swing act for Lance Burton. It was during this period that people started referring to her as "The Beauty Of Magic." The tagline stuck and today it is the name of her show; on her website it has also been translated to the Italian "*La Bellezza della Magia*." In the *Folies*, her act included a dove routine that had been taught to her by Shimada, the production and vanish of a duck, the production of a giant bunny from a Mirror Box followed by Bunny to Boy, the rock-and-roll guitar suspension of a male assistant, and a Sub Trunk.

Connie appeared at Bally's in Vegas as a featured artist in the production show *Jubilee* and in the Celebrity Room as Louie Anderson's opening act. She also opened for country music superstar Eddy Arnold and was his special guest artist at his final retirement performance in Las Vegas.

Of course, not every show in those early days ran smoothly. "At the *Folies Bergere*, I was using a bunny in a Mirror Box and he died unexpectedly. I had to keep the number in the show, but the only bunny I could get at the last minute was from my accountant's neighbor. The first show went fine, although I had to really sell the tiny bunny that was replacing my huge bunny. The second show didn't go as well. As I produced the rabbit and held him up above me, he started peeing all over me! The wetness ran down my neck and down the front of my dress. I screamed! I held the bunny away from me while he continued to pee in a huge arc onto the floor, making a two-foot-wide puddle. The trick segued into a dance number where the boy dancers had to get close to me. They were all gagging because I reeked of urine. To this day, I run into people who remember seeing my peeing bunny routine!"

One time, Channing Pollock came to see her act at the Tropicana. She remembers being "really nervous, and at the end of my act when I ran forward to take a bow, I tripped and fell into the orchestra pit!"

She was offered fulltime work in the *Folies Bergere* when Lance Burton moved to the Hacienda with his own show in 1991. No longer represented by Unique Entertainment, Connie, with the aid of manager Rick Marcelli, next found production-show work at the Showboat in Atlantic City, in *Beyond Bare Essence* at Harrah's in Lake Tahoe, and in *Masquerade* at Rosarito Beach, Mexico, as well as in *Spellbound* in both Palm Springs and Manila, Philippines.

Connie Boyd performing on the solo trapeze, circa 1984; presenting the Floating Ball in her show, The Beauty of Magic, *2009; being carried out for her straitjacket escape; performing the Mini Cube Zag as a jukebox, 2006.*

Throughout it all, Connie found herself wearing many different hats. "I've managed to learn and teach choreography; light the show without a lighting designer, with fantastic lighting systems as well as with very limited lighting possibilities; fix props that have broken through neglect, wear and tear, or travel damage; sew and repair costumes and sets that are vital to the show; apply for visas for people and animals; find MSDS (material safety data sheets) for various supplies necessary for show maintenance and cosmetic needs; create budgets; organize preproduction; teach magic to assistants who don't speak a word of English; and arrange the transport of cargo, birds, and crew. When I was a ballet student, no one mentioned that I would need accounting, promotional, budgeting, carpentry, wardrobe, and secretarial skills."

In the mid-1990s, Connie was approached by the Italian-based Costa Cruise Line to perform at sea. "I wasn't ever that interested working cruise ships, but they made me an offer I couldn't refuse." Her first booking was a forty-minute act on the *Costa Magica*. She created a show called *Magical Moments* that was very dancer-friendly, utilizing the onboard production-show cast. "Cruise ship dancers, singers, and technicians are not magicians or professional magician's assistants. The show was an entirely new way for them to think. Illusion magic and production is a team effort. Everyone must work together to create the impossible."

Connie did everything she could to make the learning process easier for non-magicians. She broke the material down into counts, because that's how dancers learn best. "Now I apply this method when teaching new dance assistants. They learn the illusions as choreography."

There were many occasions when the magic had to conform to the timing of a musical number or dance routine, which necessitated changes in the way the illusions were done. For example, time was saved in presenting the Assistant's Revenge by hot-gluing the locks they did not actually latch during the performance. The staging took too much time with the music they were given, so the dancers "fake" locked the locks so they could later appear to unlock them quicker. The audience can't tell the difference.

After a couple of years on the *Magica*, Costa asked Connie to build and star in a show called *Illusions* for the *Costa Classica*. That show, a blend of dance and magic, has been running successfully for five years, cruis-

Connie escaping from a straitjacket while suspended over a bed of nails; opening her 2009 Illusions show with the Shadow Box; performing the Floating Ball [facing page], which has become her signature routine.

ing first off South Africa and now in Asia. For the last year, Connie has cast out the lead in the show to three other women.

The theaters on cruise ships today are superb. Connie notes that many are better than some venues in Las Vegas. They have all the bells and whistles and, while she admits that the technicians on ships "used to be horrible," they are now generally terrific. Plus, she has found ships to be great places to develop material. If you want to rehearse new things at a theater on land, you usually have to deal with unions and pay for technicians and talent. On a ship, once they get to know the act and become friendly with the performers, the techs are mostly willing to try anything with you, at no cost."

Connie now lives in Genoa, Italy, and works mostly in Europe. "I like it there. Of course, there are many differences between performing in Europe and America, especially in communication."

As for her performance, Connie has changed her show so that it is more about visuals. When she first installed her version of the upside-down straitjacket escape, she tried to set the scene verbally. She later eliminated all the introductory dialogue by adding thirty seconds of video footage of Houdini's straitjacket escapes and posters, along with the word "dangerous" flashed throughout in almost every language you can think of. "This allows me to leave the stage and make a costume change and, at the same time, visually and clearly show the elements we are trying to stress. In this case, a picture is worth a thousand words."

Connie continues to perform her own full-evening show, *The Beauty of Magic*, as well as consulting for Costa on a variety of productions. She's currently in Italy working on a new show for the *Costa Beliziosa*, which she expects will probably have some magic in it. "I will help with dancers and aerial acts, as well as the magic. Then it will be back to the inter-port work, where I am flown from one port to another and stay on each ship just long enough to do my shows."

Although she is a female illusionist, she doesn't think of herself as a woman in magic. "I do play on my gender, because that makes my routines different. In a magic cooking segment where everything goes wrong, I still end up with a turkey. It's a girl thing." Connie knows that sometimes she's booked because she's a woman doing magic, but is also aware that she's sometimes *not* booked because a producer is looking for a male magician. "It goes both ways! I just try to focus more on personality than gender. It has never been enough that I am a woman. My routines have to be unique and make me different from other performers — something that people will talk about."

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Connie and I went to lunch a few days after I ran into her over the holidays. As we reminisced, it became clear that she is pretty happy these days. She feels she has finally achieved a good balance between her work life and her personal life. "I really like to work hard. I love it! But I've also adopted the European mentality of taking time to stop and smell the roses. It's very difficult to achieve the same balance in America, because there is so much pressure to obtain unrealistic goals. When I'm in the States, everyone keeps asking me what I have done and what I am doing with work. That's important, but your quality of life is also important. I think that relaxing and letting go in my personal life has actually made me a stronger performer. I like to read a book or take a walk on the beach to relax. I find that by not focusing on problems at work, you actually allow yourself to be creative — you're not being manic and trying to force something. I don't understand it, but it really works!"

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A week later, Connie came to my studio to shoot a few new magic pictures. As we wrapped up a photo session, she told me how fortunate she feels she is to have survived in the world of magic for 23 years. "That's success to me," she says, "to have gone through all the highs and lows, and yet to somehow keep working. I hope to continue to work as long as I am able. I love what I do."

Ending our session with a flourish, Connie whirled out the door and headed back to Italy.

"Ciao for now!" M

Richard Faverty, a Las Vegas–based entertainment photographer, is a regular contributor to MAGIC Magazine. *His photos have appeared on the cover of* MAGIC *more often than any other photographer's.*