



Magician Rich Bloch performs a trick, catching the card chosen by a spectator, at the Dickens Parlour Theatre in Millville.

For the past four decades, Rich Bloch has been a high-powered arbitrator in labor-management disputes, called upon for his expertise by the likes of General Motors, the NFL and the federal government. But it's his alter ego as a comic magician that people in coastal Delaware know best.

Bloch, who splits his time between Washington, D.C., and Bethany Beach, doesn't boast a birthday-party magic act. No, he's performed for audiences all over the world — in Asia, Africa and Europe, on cruise ships and on stages in Las Vegas, Atlantic

City and D.C. He has been nominated for Stage Magician of the Year six times, has won the Blackstone Award from the International Platform Association twice, and received a prestigious fellowship from Hollywood's renowned performance venue the Magic Castle. Last month he was one of three American magicians who performed at an art festival in Pyongyang at the invitation of the North Korean government, part of a cultural exchange that he hopes will help to further the relationship between the American and Korean peoples.

He's also an inventor of magic tricks — some 80

Performing Magic in Two Realms

A lawyer who changes — Presto! — into a magician

INTERVIEW BY THERESA GAWLAS MEDOFF

of them, which he and a partner used to market through the Collectors' Workshop (a side business they sold in 2000).

Three years ago, tired of the travel required by this alternate career, Bloch opened the Dickens Parlour Theatre, a 50-seat venue in a converted Millville garage. Although Bloch performs there occasionally (joined onstage by his wife, Sue, a professor at the Georgetown University Law Center), the theater primarily showcases the long list of magicians its founder has come to know over the years. Most every night, though, audience members who stick around afterward for coffee and dessert in the "parlour" will find the impresario joking around and performing close-up magic at the tables. He can't get enough of it.

Delaware Beach Life chatted up the magic man recently. Here's some of what he had to say:

How did you get started in magic? This is a true story. I was 7 years old and my father had passed away. My mother was a traveling saleslady and I was on my own a lot — being raised by my aunt and uncle [in East Orange, N.J.]. One day I wandered down to the corner into a magic shop, and there was a man behind the counter doing miracles. I was smitten.

I watched him for a long time and then I said, "I want to work here; you have to hire me." He replied, "What's your experience?" I said something like "Experience? I'm 7." But I really wanted to work there, so I lied. I had seen a magician once before in my life. I didn't remember his face, but I remembered his name. It was Ted Collins, and I said, "Well, I don't have any experience, but my dad is a very famous magician — Ted Collins." The guy was very impressed and he said, "Well, if your dad is Ted Collins, you can work here." I was delighted and as I was walking out I turned to him and said, "I don't know your name," and he said, "It's Ted Collins." I worked there for eight or nine years.

Performers, particularly ones on their way to New York to perform, would stop by and they'd take me under their wing and teach me stuff. One of those magicians was Dick DuBois, the original "Magic Clown" on television [a show that aired from 1949 to 1958], and I became his assistant when I was about 12 or 13.

Why did you veer off to become a lawyer? I really never thought I would have a career as a performer. But I went to [the University of Michigan's] law school and loved it. Labor law was something that had lit my fire as a

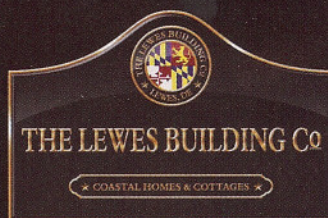


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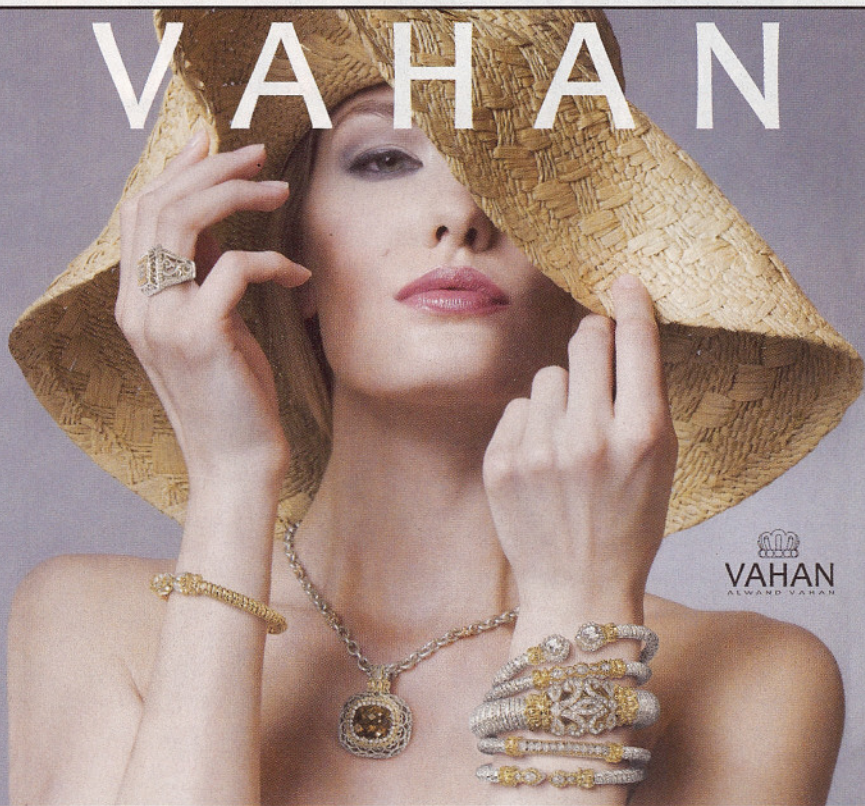
student, in great measure because it was dealing with people who had very real issues with one another but who were committed to resolving them through arbitration. They fought like hell, but they were doing it with the knowledge that when the dispute was over they were going to keep working together. That was a revelation for me. And my professors were terrific arbitrators. So when I got out of law school I went into teaching law and also arbitrating.

“There are pressures and concerns that arise in anyone's profession, and it's nice to be able to close the door for a few minutes and see what's on the other side. And that worked because I wasn't mixing law and magic.”

Who are your clients? One thing I love about arbitration is that it's very eclectic. You're hearing a different case every day. I have served as the arbitrator for Major League Baseball, the NFL, the NHL. I do arbitration for almost all of the domestic airlines and their various unions. I'm always hired by both sides as kind of a private judge and they agree in advance that I will come in and hear the case and whatever decision I render will be binding. For some time I was the associate arbitrator for GM and the auto workers. I was appointed by Secretary of State [Henry] Kissinger in the early '80s to be chairman of what was called the Foreign Service Grievance Board. So it's a very varied clientele and I love that.

Now, at this time clients didn't know you were a magician. You kind of kept it private. Yeah, I did, not because it was a secret but because these two roles feed my passions and give me a door that I can walk through to get a bit of fresh air when I need it. There are pressures and concerns that arise in anyone's profession, and it's nice to be able to close the door for a few minutes and see what's on the other side. And that worked because I wasn't mixing the two.

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When I am doing law, I don't think about magic, and vice versa.

Orson Welles bought some of your magic tricks, didn't he? Yes, I invented what later became a very popular magic trick — the Perfect Time watch. One day [in 1983] Orson Welles called to talk to me about Perfect Time. We talked for a long time and he invited me to have dinner with him if I was ever in Los Angeles. So of course I said, "How about 8 o'clock tonight?" I flew out there right away and we had dinner that night, and it started a lovely friendship. Needless to say he was very impressive, and I decided then that I really wanted to get back into performing magic, but on a professional level.

How did you come to start doing comedy magic? When I was convening with Orson Welles, I decided I would do a very serious act — mind reading and mentalism. I would be like Orson Welles. I tried it, and I was just awful. It just didn't fit me. About that time I hired a director who changed my life. He taught me over a period of maybe 10 years, and during that time we discovered that the serious stuff wasn't working because that's just not who I am. Little by little I started turning to humor, and that was my niche.

Do you ever mess up? There isn't a trick in my repertoire that I haven't messed up at one time or another. Fortunately, my whole act is premised on messing up, so that very often when I do, people don't know or they laugh and say, "That's funny; it's part of the act."

What are your goals as a magician at this point? And what about your law career?

How long are you going to continue doing both? I'm going to do them until I wake up someday and I don't want to go to work, and that hasn't happened. I deeply love what I'm doing. Both of the careers have what I yearn for, which is constant new challenges. Every law case that I have has potential of asking a new question that needs to be resolved. Everything in magic that I'm doing has a different twist to it. How could you not wake up and love having a new thrill waiting for you every day? I don't see any reason to stop doing this. It's just plain fun. ■



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