

PHOTO: SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE



A LEAGUE BY
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OF ILLUSIONISTS

They truly are a “league of extraordinary gentlemen.” While not claiming that name, or the characters from the comic books or film of that title, the seven star performers of *The Illusionists* are indeed extraordinary. All seemingly endowed with magical abilities, these performers have pooled their talents and created a powerful new show.

The production was created by Brett Daniels and Simon Painter, who worked together in Myrtle Beach in 2009. Daniels is a magician with an impressive number of shows on his résumé. Painter, who began his career as a classical violinist and performed with *Spirit of the Dance* in Las Vegas, is a theatrical producer. Having helmed productions at the Sydney Opera House (SOH) for the past three summers (or winters, if one thinks in a North American time frame), Painter pitched a magic show to the SOH management for January 2012. He and Daniels flew to Australia last August to sell the idea, joining with Tim Lawson, an Australian producer of Broadway shows in his home country and abroad, who has worked with Painter on SOH shows several times in recent years. Lawson and Painter became the executive producers of *The Illusionists* and were instrumental in convincing the Opera House to mount the show.

“Frankly, the Opera House people were worried this would be a ‘cheesy magic show,’” says Brett. “It was our challenge to deliver something that they could put on their stage and be proud of. We convinced them that magic was right for this venue, that the acts and the show really are world-class.” The executives were still unsure, but when their marketing people came up with the character concept, giving each magician an identity to go with their specific style and powers, Brett and Simon ran with it. “From a marketing perspective,” says Daniels, “I think the idea of giving each performer a theme was a home run. Everybody across the board has liked that. It’s pretty simple, but I don’t think it has been done quite like this before.”

Having received the go-ahead, the team was assembled, uniting magicians who fit into easily defined characters. They were given character names and a brief description of skills:

The Anti-Conjuror (Dan Sperry), shock illusions.

The Escapologist (Andrew Basso), death-defying escapes.

The Gentleman (James Dimmare), dove magic.

The Grand Illusionist (Brett Daniels), mega-illusions.

The Inventor (Kevin James), magic inventions and groundbreaking illusions.



The Mentalist (Philip Escoffey), mindreading and the paranormal.

The Trickster (Jeff Hobson), comedy magic.

Most of the cast knew one another, and many had worked together over the years. Five of the seven acts came from the US, with Philip Escoffey — who refers to his mentalist character outside of *The Illusionists* as “The Grey Man” — coming from the UK, and Andrew Basso from Italy.

Along with the magicians and their assistants, the producers added eight dancers — four male, four female — from the US and Australia. Each dancer was given an individual character, which they maintained throughout the show. Stylistically, they fit into the show with a steampunkish look, odd and sometimes creepy, with, as Brett puts it, a “freaky, Goth-Victorian futuristic” feel.

Brett Daniels, Grand Illusionist and the show’s illusion director, performs his Jet Turbine effect and his signature levitation appearance.

Daniels, the illusion director for the show, worked with Simon and director Neil Dorwood, meeting with each other and the rest of the cast in various locations around the US before heading Down Under. Concepts were solidified, and dreams became reality as a show took shape. The challenge was how to bring seven magicians together and make it work, make it the right mix, and add some ensemble elements, so it was not just “act, act, act” like most variety shows.

A Los Angeles band known simply as Z — the letter character of their name being made of a pair of 7s, one inverted, a synchronistic nod to the seven magic stars — was hired to provide a live soundtrack for the production.

They watched videos of the acts and created all new music, providing what Daniels calls “an exciting rock-and-roll, hip-hop, eclectic, techno score.”

Arriving in Sydney right after the new year, the cast and crew had about seven days of rehearsals together before the world premiere of *The Illusionists*. It was a new experience for everyone. “It was really the first time the band met the magic,” Brett says. While the basics were created over several months, “we all got together and worked out how everything would happen live onstage, the band and the acts adapting to each other during rehearsals. I had never done that before. And neither had they!”

By then, time was tight, as was the rehearsal space. The studio was rather small, without much room for teching the illusions, and no way to hang anything. And the intended performance venue had challenges of its own. Daniels explains: “While the Sydney Opera House is a wonderful, iconic building, and everyone there treated us just wonderfully, it’s a hard place to do a magic show. It’s not a production building; there are no wings, no flies, no curtains. It took hundreds of hours, much of that done long distance, to get everything coordinated and turn the Concert Hall into a theater for a production show.” Eventually, everything came together and was seen by thousands of spectators in the grand building on Sydney harbor.

The show began with Jeff Hobson doing a silent comedy spot, accompanying the theater’s recorded pre-show announcements with visual gags, such as producing cigars when the “no smoking” warning was given. That segued to a large screen showing a man’s

eyes, with a voiceover intoning, “There are 2,679 people in this audience,” then breaking them down into categories — so many male, so many female, the number of children, how many were divorced, etc. — and then getting oddly specific. “Seven people here have committed a felony; two have murdered; one has yet to commit a murder; and one person in this audience has the ability to read minds.” The camera then pulled back to reveal that the eyes onscreen belonged to a man sitting among the crowd. “I’m Philip Escoffey; The Mentalist. Welcome to *The Illusionists*.”

The action shifted back to the stage for an opening production number featuring the dancers and short segments from each of the star magicians. Dimmare did a sleight-of-hand sequence, Dan Sperry showed a DeKolta Chair, and Kevin James did his Snow routine. Andrew Basso made his entrance by being lowered down through the snow, upside-down in a straitjacket, and then effecting his escape. Brett Daniels did a Zombie, followed by his Horse & Carriage Appearance, which featured a surprise switch to reveal Hobson.

There was no real story line or narrative thread through the show. The magicians took turns throughout, most of them making several solo appearances, with transitions being handled by the dancers and various cast members. Dan Sperry did Russian Roulette and his Lifesaver routine — the latter being the only number in the entire show done without the live band, Sperry working instead to the Perry Como recording of “Magic Moments.” Kevin James and company did their Chaplin routine, the Floating Rose, and closed with The Operation.

Playing against the psychic cliché, Philip Escoffey spoke of coincidences and tendencies rather than improbability and the impossible; his sharp-witted, clever prediction and revelation routine had multiple endings, each more incredible than the other. Dimmare presented his bird act, his Gentleman character being fittingly introduced with a full production number by the dance ensemble.

Hobson’s solo spots included Card in Mouth, Egg Bag, and a rope routine. While all of the acts went over very well, Brett Daniels notes that “Hobson killed, killed, killed — let me say it again, he *killed* in Sydney. He and Dan Sperry were both unbelievably strong there.”

Daniels himself did his Jet Turbine illusion and the appearance/levitation of one of the dancers. Accompanied by a drum solo, he also did a two-and-a-half-minute sleight-of-hand act performed for a camera, to let the whole audience see it up close. Brett admits that since his character was named The Grand Illusionist, “we took some creative license and we had to cross some lines a little bit” to include a close-up segment in the show.

After a transitional production number featuring the dancers working with D’Lites, the show finale brought out the full cast. Following a motorcycle-themed Crystal Box appearance of a “cycle girl,” Daniels and the girl were raised up astride the bike in a Cargo Net while the rest of the illusionists gathered in a fabric enclosure onstage. Everyone then vanished, motorcycle and all. Brett and the girl reappeared on the cycle, riding down the aisle toward the stage, then the “girl” was revealed to be Hobson. All of the other magicians appeared in various locations among the people in the audience.

On opening night, the show ran three hours and twenty minutes. The cast and producers held an emergency meeting afterward, since they had another show to do just an hour later. Knowing cuts had to be made, they decided what would be taken out. In the end, the show ended up being two hours and twenty minutes, with an intermission.

Everybody agreeably compromised throughout the whole process of creating and mounting the show. As Brett notes, “You’ve got seven magicians, most of whom have their own show. Now how do you cut that down? But everybody was very generous. We had too much of a show, but there was no fighting, no squabbling.”

Some of the segments that had to be sacrificed were interactive numbers in which the magicians would step out of their own acts to work with one another. One such routine that survived the final cut was one of the highlights of the show and opened the second half. The scene was “sort of like the Last Supper of Cups & Balls,” says Brett proudly.





[From facing page] Escapologist Andrew Basso escapes in a flurry of snow; Anti-Conjuror Dan Sperry; Gentleman James Dimmare; Mentalist Philip Escoffey; Basso in the Water Torture Cell. [Top] The Illusionists assemble onstage for the finale.

The general idea was put together by the whole cast, with everyone contributing to it onstage and off. Dimmare worked as the host to the seven conjurers, all standing behind a long table, each doing a version of the Cups & Balls while bantering back and forth. Daniels did a simple explanation of the trick, then, he explains, “it got funky with Dan Sperry, who would come out and insult me, and we’d go back and forth. Basso would



do something with a lock and some water; Kevin James would do something with his disembodied hand. All the while, Hobson, the comedy relief, was sitting over on the end; the disappearing balls kept reappearing in his drink, which was very funny as he was getting drunker and drunker as the routine went on.” For the conclusion, the balls changed to live chicks. Kevin James placed the baby chickens in a KFC bucket — and he put one in his mouth.

The company performed twenty-one shows over eleven days, January 11–21. The schedule included some three-show days, demanding eighteen-hour days for some of the cast and crew. It was exhausting but



gratifying, as every one of the shows was sold out. With word of mouth and critical acclaim, the staff at the venue says the show could have run for an additional week and still sold out, but other shows had already been booked for the space.

With any new show, there will be some problems along the way. One of the major headaches in *The Illusionists* production nearly turned deadly. As might be expected, it involved the death-defying Escapologist, who presented his version of Houdini’s Water Torture Cell as the last act before the intermission.

A Cell was purchased for the show, but it was damaged in transit and leaked. Much time and money was spent on fixing the



Six Illusionists (with one dancer at the far end) gather at the Cups & Balls table. Trickster Hobson returns wristwatches he stole throughout the show. Inventor Kevin James presents his puzzling Sawing known as *The Operation*.

prop, including basically tearing it apart and rebuilding it four times, and calling in marine enclosure specialists from the Sydney Aquarium. Additional problems included how to drain the tank, and the need to buy a \$5,000 filtration system for the water.

Basso's presentational concept for the escape was to do it in full view of the audience, the crowd at least mentally holding their breath along with him as he remains upside-down in the tank for a couple minutes before he is seen picking the lock, extracting his feet from the stocks, and ultimately freeing himself. When the escape was finally put onstage in Sydney, a week after the rest of the show had been up and running, it was rushed together, and serious problems ensued.

"Andrew nearly died in there," Daniels says, "through no fault of his own. I've done the Water Torture Cell myself, but this was the most dangerous thing I've ever seen in my life. Somebody changed the gimmick so it was no longer a gimmick. Plus, there was no way to access any air, and Andrew didn't know that. We found out onstage, when he was two minutes into it — that he was going to run out of air in a minute and not be able to get any, and he wouldn't be able to get out." The crew had to make a call to close the curtain and yank the 26-year-old escape artist out of the tank. "That scared a lot of people," says Brett, "but he went back in again for the next show, and he did it in the next ten or twelve shows of the run."

The entire show was "a pretty ambitious project for a one-off production," marvels Daniels, but a very satisfying one. After all was said and done, he and the producers gave it "an eight out of ten for having accomplished what we wanted. Not bad for a first offering."

Future incarnations of *The Illusionists* are in the planning stages, with the show being pitched by promoters around the world. A second run is scheduled for February 17 through March 4 in Singapore. Because of prior commitments, Hobson and Kevin James are not taking part in the shows for that run. The cast drops down to six principle Illusionists, with Swedish comedy magician Michael Halverson taking on the role of The Trickster.

Daniels admits that six acts might still be too ambitious a number for the show. "I think the right number might end up being five, to give everybody enough time so they can breathe a little bit. But even with seven, for me, it was sheer joy and fun — a once in a lifetime kind of thing that I hope we can do again and again!" **M**