

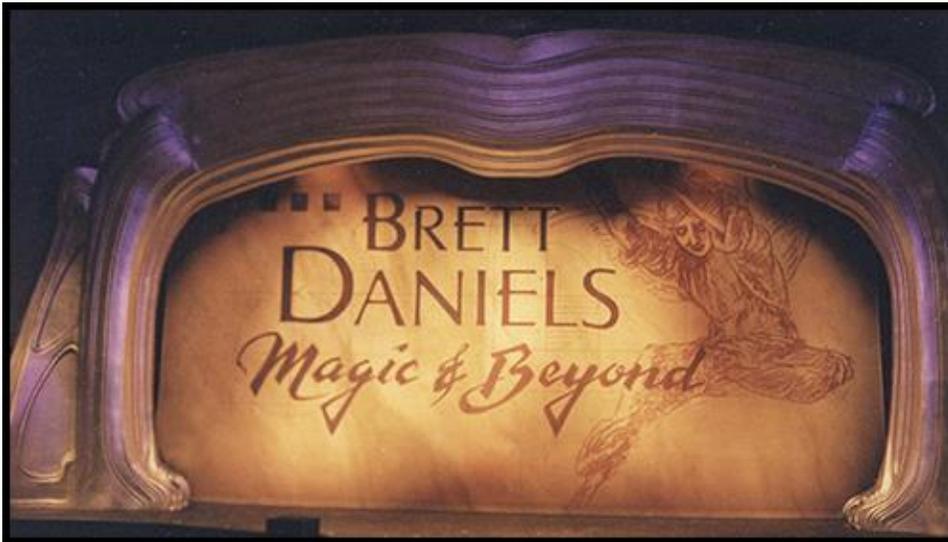
DANIELS IN DIXIE

A review of Brett Daniels' show at the Gold Strike

As reviewed by Steve Bryant for Genii Magazine. Reproduced by permission.

Magic and Beyond

Just minutes south of Memphis, is the nation's third largest gaming complex, with over a dozen top-flight casinos. The newest of these Midsouth casino resorts, and arguably the best, is the Mandalay Bay managed Gold Strike. The Gold Strike features a 31-story hotel tower with approximately 1200 luxury rooms and a lively large scale casino. The centerpiece of the Gold Strike's promised "24 karat excitement" is the new Millennium Theater, a modern 800-seat performing venue. The interior of this large theater is completely appointed in black, and a silver proscenium bounds the stage. Principal resident of the Millennium Theater, armed with a new Multi-year contract and mysterious powers, is Brett Daniels, master illusionist and sleight-of-hand artist upon whose shoulders the future of live entertainment in Mississippi rides.



I ventured to Mississippi during the Christmas holidays to catch the opening of Brett's new show, Brett Daniels: Magic & Beyond. I was fortunate to arrive just in time to catch the very first live performance, presented to employees only, on Monday, December 29th. The "real" show would open just two days later, on New Year's Eve, to a sold-out house.

For those of you who have caught only snippets of Brett's work on television (he appeared on the first three World's Greatest Magic specials, for example,) let it be noted that this is a major magical opening. Brett's hour and a half illusion show is a world-class extravaganza...

ACT I

As you enter the theater the backdrop greets you displaying the show's title on a gold-tinged background. This background art consists of an angel with various circles, tangents, and angles, reminiscent of such ancient works as Da Vinci's notebooks. This juxtaposition of ancient science with mythical characters will recur throughout the evening's performance.

The first two illusions, both featured on the WGM specials, get the show off to an exciting start. First up is the transformation of a radio-controlled sports car to a full-scale Lamborghini, with Brett inside, all on a raised platform. Six of his very pretty dancers, in black leather caps, jackets, and short shorts, provide the necessary misdirection. Exiting the car, Brett immediately produces another girl from behind a cloth and assists her into a thin sawing box. The sawing is accomplished via a giant meat cleaver, after which the two sections (of boxes and girl) are separated. Now for the killer: the boxes are completely removed, revealing the girl's moving legs on thin table and her writhing torso on another. This illusion showcases three distinctive attributes of most of Brett's illusions: (1) Surprise (in this case, the girl's initial appearance is unexpected, as is the removal of the boxes,) (2) Extension (removing the boxes extends the magic beyond that seen in most sawings), and (3) Stunning visuals (the cleaver is far more memorable than another saw, as is the sight of the girl's exposed body parts lying on those thin tables.)



One of Brett's most impressive backdrops features the mythical character Atlas holding a large globe-shaped scientific gadget made of metal bands or rings. I was stumped as to what to call this object (in an illusion-scale instance of it, Brett calls it an Atlas Fire Globe,) and my research finally turned up the term armillary sphere, an ancient astronomical device for measuring the positions of heavenly objects. At this point in the show, Brett performs "zombie" with a basketball-sized version of this contraption,

which not only floats on the edge of the cloth but occasionally spins rapidly on its axis, giving it a gyroscopic look. The instrument eventually vanishes, and Brett produces a long metal coil from the cloth and finally the first of the gorgeous birds that populate the show. (Brett works with large birds such as cockatoos and parrots. He also periodically launches them into the deep black void of the theater, where they fly in great loop circles to return unerringly to his hand.)



Brett next performs card manipulations (fan productions, single card productions, etc.), and this is where the audience realizes that this is far more than a guy who can climb out of a sports car or chop a lady in half. His card work is exquisite, and this is also where the jaded magicians in the audience are going to do a double take and realize (for the first of many times in this show) that they are watching someone special. A parrot is produced to climax the card work, again fulfilling the surprise/extension/stunning visual characteristics one now expects.

Brett steps into the audience and has a child select a card. She returns it to the deck and shuffles. Back on stage, Brett holds the cards and strikes a serious pose. One of the birds flies toward him from the distant recesses of the theater. Just before the bird reaches him, Brett tosses the cards into the air, and the bird lands on his hand with the selected card in its beak. This was featured on one of the WGM episodes and is most effective in the flesh (and feathers.)

Concluding this card-bird sequence, Brett performs a cage vanish and then produces a parrot from the cloth, which visually splits into two parrots for a truly stunning visual.

The Anderson newspaper tear is next and Brett has the good sense, as did Doug Henning, to use the classic Anderson patter that makes the effect so amusing. The audience clearly enjoyed this number.

A white cockatoo is placed into a human-scale antique birdcage. After covering the cage briefly, Brett transforms the bird into a girl in a skin-tight white outfit. A very sexy white outfit—my favorite of the evening.

An incredible stage setting is used for Brett's version of *Disembodied*. Gigantic gear teeth move up and down, in a scene evocative of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, as Brett is placed into his science-fictionish chamber to have his midsection vanish. (I believe it was in Las Vegas that I first encountered this bizarre chamber. I was in earshot of Max Maven, who exclaimed, as the strange apparatus first appeared, "I have one of those in my living room.")



I mentioned earlier that this show contains elements that transcend other shows you've seen, and the close-up segment that follows is one of those elements. Brett sits at a table, where his hands are shot by a portable video camera and projected on a large screen. The magic is a thing of absolute beauty. Brett works silently here, first manipulating cards alone, and then cards and coins. A deck appears, a deck vanishes; coins appear and disappear from their positions in a matrix. Of the many things that captivated me throughout this sequence, the one that impressed me most was a barehanded vanish of four kings, one at a time, and each by a different method. Magicians aren't going to watch this, as some did with the David Blaine special, and crab, "Anyone could do that." Rather, they are going to say, "I want to do that! Where can I find out how to do it?"

If you ask me, *Interlude* is the most beautiful illusion in the show, with a lovely surreal backdrop that features a cityscape, a gigantic full moon, and the face of the Statue of Liberty, in profile, watching over the goings on. Although the illusion follows the basic plot in which a girl penetrates Brett's body, Brett introduces some innovative subplots and a climax that makes the illusion all the more baffling. Sorry—you'll have to see the show yourself for further details.

A boy from the audience joins Brett from Dai Vernon's "Symphony of the Rings," presented much as Doug Henning once did it. During the routine, Brett gently satirizes "smoke and laser beam" illusionists by having the boy wear sunglasses and use a fog machine as the lad separates two rings. I should inject here that Brett is at ease with audience assistants, and especially children. It's a nice routine, and the boy is sent away with one of Brett's posters. This routine, by the way, is performed to yet another gorgeous backdrop, of layered red draperies and ropes, like sails on a pirate ship.

The next routine calls for an adult volunteer, and the audience of employees, who all know each other, quickly nominate a popular young security guard named Marvin. Marvin gamely takes the stage, but

there is a problem. The trick for which he has “volunteered” is the guillotine illusion, and Marvin is a solidly built fellow. As Brett tries to stick Marvin’s head into the device, he can’t help noticing, as the audience has, that Marvin “has absolutely no neck.” It’s a source of shared hilarity as Brett struggles to fasten the stocks. Fortunately it all works out well, the blade falls, and Marvin exits the stage intact.

The final illusion of the first half begins with a helmeted policeman Walking down the aisle and arresting Brett for illegally parking his Lamborghini. This illusion transpires to Elvis singing *Jailhouse Rock*. Brett is locked in a jail cell from which only his hands can be seen to emerge. The cop (L.A. fuzz?) fires his pistol at the cage, which is suddenly shown empty. The officer then removes his helmet and turns out to be Brett all along. The music aptly switches to Elvis’ *Devil in Disguise*. The dancers are enticingly attired in police uniforms, which allows Brett to use the line, “They frisk me every night.”

ACT II

The magic resumes. A gigantic eyeball descends from the ceiling, the pupil becomes a ring of fire, and Brett appears within the ring. He descends to the stage and steps forward to his Atlas fire globe (armillary sphere?), lights a flame within, and produces a girl inside of it. The magic is coming at us fast.

There is another piece of ancient scientific apparatus on stage, a large metal arc, perhaps a large dial, marked off with Roman numerals on top and with an arrow pointing up and to the right. In the center of this is a chamber large enough to contain the girl, with an attached box for her head. She enters the device, and Brett removes her boxed head in short order. After some byplay the head is replaced and the girl is vertically split into six sections, which fan out along the periphery of the dial like so many slices of bread.

Back “in one,” Brett offers to explain how to do a magic trick, and does so via a mock explanation of the color-changing handkerchief. This is followed by bringing a young lady to the stage to participate in the Notepad Card Rise. Again, these familiar routines are well received by the audience.



You may have seen the basic idea of the Table of Death on the first *Champions of Magic*. In Brett's variation, the death that must be escaped is coming from a huge vertical drill mechanism with menacing claws. He is locked to a table, a short screen is raised, and you can witness his attempts to escape via shadows cast from within onto the screen. The escape seems to be coming along nicely when the drill suddenly plummets, "killing" our hero. But another screen is raised and then removed to reveal that Brett has escaped after all. The buildup is great, the mechanism is truly threatening, and the shadows look like the real thing.

There are four featured items left, all of surpassing excellence, and it is likely to be these effects that are going to linger in the memories of audiences as they return to Memphis or Atlanta or Jacksonville. The first is an interlude Brett calls Vaudeville. A picture lowers, and the slides are projected on it of various past artists, including, T. Nelson Downs, Cardini, and Channing Pollock. Brett has left the stage for this, and the girls in the show are dancing off to the side. Eventually, a red-curtained frame descends, a stage-within-a-stage, and Brett reappears within, in top hat and tails, evoking memories of yesteryear stars. In this nostalgic setting Brett performs a billiard ball routine, using white billiard balls and a red rose to point up the vanishes and appearances. I am seldom moved by billiard ball routines – they are usually so confusing it's difficult to tell what's taking place – but this one is expertly and quite magically rendered. It's another of those special moments that sets this show apart from your expectations.

Next is Brett's Marilyn Monroe routine that you might remember from WGM II. It's a romantic playlet of the type David Copperfield enjoys doing. Brett begins by reading a Yeats poem, a favorite of Marilyn's, from a large book, about twice the size of the Steward James tome. There is a large painting of Marilyn suspended from the ceiling. It's briefly covered with a cloth, and the visage of Marilyn vanishes. From the cloth a real, physical Marilyn emerges. Her skirt billows as the wind blows up from below, recreating the familiar Marilyn pose from *The Seven Year Itch*. Brett wraps her in a cowl and cape, and suddenly she vanishes again, with no covering. With a flick of the cape, she's back in the painting. A gesture by Brett and a gust of wind close the book of poems to end the piece.

Brett takes this opportunity to thank his backstage crew, his spot and soundmen, his stage manager, and his eight breathtakingly gorgeous (my adjectives) dancers. He announces that he is about to perform the final two illusions of the show, one of which has never been seen before anywhere. (I am thrilled to be in the only audience for which this announcement is true.)

Brett now performs the levitation trick that etched him into many of our minds when he first performed it on *WGM I*. The routine begins as a floating ball routine, with a large silver ball. As Brett stands atop a tall table, with the ball floating in front of him, the ball suddenly turns into a large silver cloth. Brett lowers the cloth to reveal a girl floating in midair. She is not only floating, but has suddenly appeared in midair by magic! She descends and rises convincingly, she writhes in midair, she continues to float as Brett passes a burning hoop over her (one pass). Brett places the cloth back over her. She descends momentarily and then rises again. Brett finally whips the cloth away, and the girl has vanished, apparently returned to the nothingness from which she sprang. Again, as with the best of Brett's illusions, this one is full of surprises, of extending the boundaries, and of startling visuals.

If you have any immediate plans to attend Brett's show, and you want to be completely stunned by its climax, stop reading right here and turn to Jamy Ian Swiss' book reviews or some other section of the magazine. You have been warned!



For the final illusion, Brett announces that he intends to do some Flying. (The word conjures up David Copperfield's "Flying" illusion. I am thus prepared to be disappointed if Brett merely performs a "variation" on that routine. I needn't have worried.) This is a clearly military number, and the girls are fetchingly attired in long camouflage pants and bikini tops with brimmed caps of the type worn by General Westmoreland or Schwarzkopf (choose your own war.) If the government ever needs to beef up our military ranks again, these girls in these outfits could induce young men to enlist in droves. (I am deliberately taking this opportunity to express my appreciation, not only of how fresh and lovely and wonderfully trained Brett's dancers have been, but of how professionally and appropriately they have been costumed. Visuals are clearly important to Brett in establishing the moods of various pieces, and the costuming has contributed significantly to that effort.) Ready to sign up, I return my attention to the illusion. Brett dons a fighter pilot's helmet and oxygen mask and turns to ascend a small platform, where he sits in the seat from a jet's cockpit. The girls cover him with a cloth, and he vanishes. Think DeKolts Chair Vanish meets *Top Gun*. Brett reappears in the audience to conclude the illusion, and he returns to the stage to take his final bow and say goodnight. But the show isn't over. He turns his back to the audience, and a golden curtain billows from above. In mere seconds, he whips this curtain aside to reveal a stage completely filled with a full-scale, rock solid Navy fighter jet! Nothing prepared me for this. I've always pooh-poohed such productions on *WGW* installments, thinking there was nothing magical about them. But this hits between the eyes. I heard nothing, I saw nothin – the plane is simply there. An expletive issues from my lips. Completely stunned, and still slightly discombobulated by my first-row proximity to those dancing G.I. Janes, and now this, I lose all focus on taking notes and taking photographs, and I merely join in on what I hope to be years of standing ovations.