



Mystery Theater

BRETT DANIELS

CONJURING UP A SPOOKY MIX OF MAGIC AND MURDER

BY STEVE BRYANT
PHOTOS BY ANDREW MICHALS

So what is Wohscigam? Some call it a magic show. Some call it a murder mystery. Others call it a whodunit. I call it a little bit of a new genre, an updated version of all of the above.

We are going to take some elements you are already familiar with and combine them in a brand new way. There is magic, the kind of magic known as legerdemain. No big boxes, no sawing a lady in half. Just pure sleight of hand. There is a murder mystery, the 1912 murder of magician Lester Tiband. It's a whodunit. Who killed Lester Tiband, and why? Now, your part in all of this is of course to enjoy the magic. But follow the clues. Maybe you'll pick up on something that I've missed. My role will be multi-faceted—magician, historical tour guide, and crime scene investigator. I'll lay it all out for you from A to Z. If at the end you're still a little bit bewildered, just look to me, and I will provide you with the answers. I guess what I'm really trying to say here is don't sit back and don't relax. Please stay on the edge of your seats. Watch closely. Listen carefully. I've chosen my words precisely and will only repeat myself when necessary. I will only repeat myself when necessary. [Big laugh] Wohscigam begins at the end, with the death of magician Lester Tiband. And so we have a mystery to explore, a mystery about a dead magician and his manuscript of secrets, secrets that led to his murder in the year of 1912. So we had better get at it. The trail has been growing cold for 95 years. Ahead lies doom and gloom, murder and mystery, death and dismemberment ... and all this on a school night.

Brett Daniels, Opening remarks to Wohscigam

On two chilly evenings in April, at the Waukesha Expo Center in Waukesha, Wisconsin, Brett Daniels climaxed five years of development, a year of warehouse rehearsals, and a million dollar invested in labor and rehearsal with two performances of what is not only his new magic show, but perhaps a new genre. *Wohscigam* (pronounced WOSH-i-gam) debuted over the

two-night run for some 800 invited fans, friends, and fellow magicians, many of whom drove up from Chicago at the expense of surrendering their tickets to a David Copperfield show. Chicago's Steve Chezaday was on hand and Marshall Brodien reserved an entire row.

Brett's longtime Wisconsin friend, magician David Seebach, opened each evening's performance with a spooky



demonstration of spirit slate writing and then established the parameters. The performances would constitute a theatrical preview, as one might have attended during out-of-town tryouts for *The Producers*. The audience's job was to let Brett and his staff know what they thought. Clipboards with questionnaires would be provided after the shows, and comments were solicited.

On with the show, which opens intensely with Saliva's rock anthem "Ladies and Gentlemen." The ominous opening notes (dum dum dum *dum*) of Beethoven's Fifth stir two oversized gargoyles to life, who spread their great marble wings and issue steam from their nostrils. Creepy. The main curtains part to reveal two chandeliers of electrically lit candles and a pair of floor-to-ceiling red sashes. As the sashes suddenly swoosh upward and out of sight, Brett appears in the rafters, his arms and red cape spread, a fan of cards in each hand. He slowly floats down to the stage, like Dracula showing off, and then walks forward to begin his card manipulation sequence. He follows this with a seated close-up segment, including the productions of Aces from a shuffled deck that lead to exquisite vanishes of each and then the deck itself. The audience gasps, favorably impressed.

His magical credentials established, Brett at last addresses the audience. With the combined mischief and gravity of a Vincent Price, an Alfred Hitchcock, a Rod Serling, Brett lays out the concept of the show with the remarks at

the top of this article. As the show's magician, tour guide, and crime scene investigator, he promises an evening unlike any we have experienced before.

Our initial view of theater itself promises the same. In addition to those brooding gargoyles, eight large flat-screen television monitors flank the audience, with two more facing us on stage along with a movie screen that can be lowered into position. Antique picture frames house each monitor, a mix of old-world ambience and high tech electronics that characterizes the show. Video grants the spectators close-up views of Brett's sleight of hand as well as historical footage critical to the solution of the crime. A large backdrop poster adorns the entire left wall of the theater, and the two candle-lit chandeliers soar over a severely distressed stage purportedly ripped from "the Letterman theater in Reading, Pennsylvania." A variety of antique tables provides the surfaces for Brett's close-up magic, often moved into position by a charming young lady in period attire (actress/dancer Gwen Bliss). And ever-present, to the right of the stage, stands Lester Tiband's manuscript, a large tome of magic that looks as if it would be at home in those libraries in *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, the ultimate piece required to solve the evening's puzzle.

In its review of Brett's first full-scale illusion show in Tunica, *Genii* made the case that Brett's magic features surprise, stunning visuals, and extension (Brett's magic goes beyond what other magicians do with the same effects), a

formula that certainly carries on in *Wohscigam*. In one sequence, seated at a wide coffee table, Brett has a child from the audience select a card, from which he then produces four Morgan dollars. After a nice version of "Matrix," Brett causes one of the dollars to disappear, only to visibly reappear inside a small glass that has been covered with a larger glass. He repeats this with the glasses at various points on the table. He then removes a large square panel from the center of the table to reveal a pane of glass. The video monitors provide stunning views of first the coins and then the selected card penetrating the glass. The finale is that the card doesn't quite penetrate the glass, but rather becomes trapped between what had all along been *two* panes of glass.

In a standup segment, Brett causes a table that supports a lit candle to float in the air. Those familiar with Losander ads think they know what's going on. But then Brett lands the table and walks about ten feet away from it, at which point the table scoots along the stage to rejoin him. Then both Brett *and* the table soar above the stage. After returning to earth, Brett lifts the candlestick off the table, and the candle somersaults out of and back into its base. Not your father's floating table!

In a third example, Brett has the excellent taste to perform the Cups and Balls in the classic Vernon manner, climaxing with plenty of stuff as large loads. It's then that things get strange, as Brett waves a silk scarf briefly in front of all this flotsam and jetsam and it all turns into a single, solid *wooden carving* of the magic trick just witnessed, which is passed out for inspection.

Additional legerdemain includes a ribbon-spread variation of "Unshuffled" that keeps the audience on track with the mystery, a "Wild Card" sequence that kills with a visible Color Changing Deck finale (gasps from the audience on this one), and a surprising multi-color "Gypsy Thread" routine that ties up "loose ends" and introduces red herrings. Brett's stand-up magic features a "Miser's Dream" with a lovely antique coin ladder, a Richard Ross-like mul-



Master magician Dante Silbert arrives in a carriage conjured from thin air by Brett Daniels



tipl watch production, and, after Brett's sudden appearance mid-stage in a swirl of fog, his signature billiard ball routine. One of the most original sequences involves Brett interacting with an on-screen magician from the past, the two of them tugging on the same silk, and then the video magician springing cards from his hand, cards which materialize in three dimensions and flutter to the stage.

But it isn't all about magic. There is a murder mystery afoot. The posters have promised that this is the show in which "Houdini Meets Hitchcock," and so it shall be. Just after the Coins Through Glass segment, Brett turns our attention to the body of Lester Tiband, lying on the floor,

blood flowing from his severed hand in billowing streams of red silk, the dramatic technique used in *Shakespeare in Love*. Throughout the show, to accompanying video animation, Brett narrates the history of magic. The audience meets Erdnase, Selbit, Chung Ling Soo, Houdini, Leipzig, Downs. Names are important, as are the lives the magicians lived. Ah, but which are key, which are red herrings? There is wordplay, there is history, and there are dramatizations. While Brett narrates, the crime is re-enacted live, as it might have been done at the end of a Hercule Poirot or Nick Charles mystery. Masked characters rapidly criss-cross the stage—Tiband himself, then an agent who insists

on handing out three business cards, a juggler, and a master magician for whom Tiband works. Arguments ensue inside a dressing room, characters depart, Tiband meets his gory fate. In an attempt to locate a card and escape from “the Device,” a sort of turn-of-the-last-century Hand Chopper, something goes awry and Tiband’s severed hand falls into the little basket, leading to his demise. Later, Brett narrates the scene a second time, but now the audience can see *through* the dressing room wall, can witness the Shakespeare-like identity switches, is startled to see the master magician arrive via a stage-filling carriage and team of horses that Brett has conjured from nowhere. (Although the “magic” part of the program is pure legerdemain, the story-telling part is anything but. Brett appears from and vanishes into mid-air, usually hovering well above the stage floor, and the production of the enormous carriage with its carousel-like team of mounts is as startling as his jet plane production was at Tunica. This is a sleight-of-hand show that fills three tractor trailers.)

We’ve seen *how* the murder occurred, but must now figure out *why*. The motive begins to unfold when a disembodied hand alters the text in Tiband’s secret manuscript. “Ah,” the audience murmurs aloud. But the revelations come in waves, and are ingeniously parceled out. Just when you think you know it all, there is more to know. Like the best of fiction, the outcome is at once surprising yet inevitable. By the time it all plays out, you are convinced that the entire sweep of 19th and 20th century magic has led to this night, to this show, to this denouement.

So how was the show? Because of space limitations in the warehouse and the time constraints of installing such a complex show inside the Expo Center, the opening night show for the audience was the first complete run-through available to the cast and crew. (Author’s note: I would have been *terrified*.) Minor imperfections resulted: an actor

missed a cue here, a prop malfunctioned there, and, worst of all, Brett contended with a severe case of laryngitis. But all in all both cast and audience were highly pleased. The concept held up well: the “1912 legerdemain” played exceptionally strong and the murder mystery revelations drew repeated sighs of satisfaction. Much of the show is very high tech—the hip music, the sound effects, the live video, and the pre-recorded video—and this aspect integrated seamlessly and nearly flawlessly with the live action. The audience members took their comment duties seriously, and the crew looked forward to evaluating what worked, what didn’t.

The show enjoys a tight, talented, and dedicated staff. Two young venture capitalists are backing the show, one of whom has an onstage part. Brett’s immediate crew of technical personnel and onstage talent have either worked with him before in Tunica or Branson, or they draw from magician friends in the Chicago and Milwaukee areas. Brett’s “outside” contributors include artist David Starr, who created such elements as the wall-size poster, the Hand Chopper design, and the distressed stage. Illusion builder Bill Smith realized Starr’s Hand Chopper mechanics with a new method that allows the hand to fall but does *not* work like Grant’s “French Arm Chopper.” Bill also created the disembodied hand that alters the manuscript and the wonderful “coin table” that should make owners of Dean Dill’s new “Dean’s Triangle” envious.

Of course the critical member of the crew is Brett Daniels himself. Brett is the creator, the writer, the director, and the star performer, hence it all hangs on him. A crew member remarked that it amazed him how Brett kept dozens of video, sound, and lighting cues in his head, knew exactly where every member of the cast should be at all times, and yet was on stage performing, with extensive dialogue. Brett has enviable sleight-of-hand talent, he has the likeability that translates into star power, and he has the narrative skills that allow him to lay out the mystery with conviction, to draw the audience in. Brett is utterly at ease on stage, and the audience shares in his comfort. Just as the story line leads you to understand that all magic has led to this show, it leads you to understand that it has led to this performer.

Although magic has been incorporated in plays before—Doug Henning’s *The Magic Show* and *Merlin* are recent famous examples—this is perhaps the first time a magic



A relaxed Brett Daniels recaps the clues, unravels the mysteries



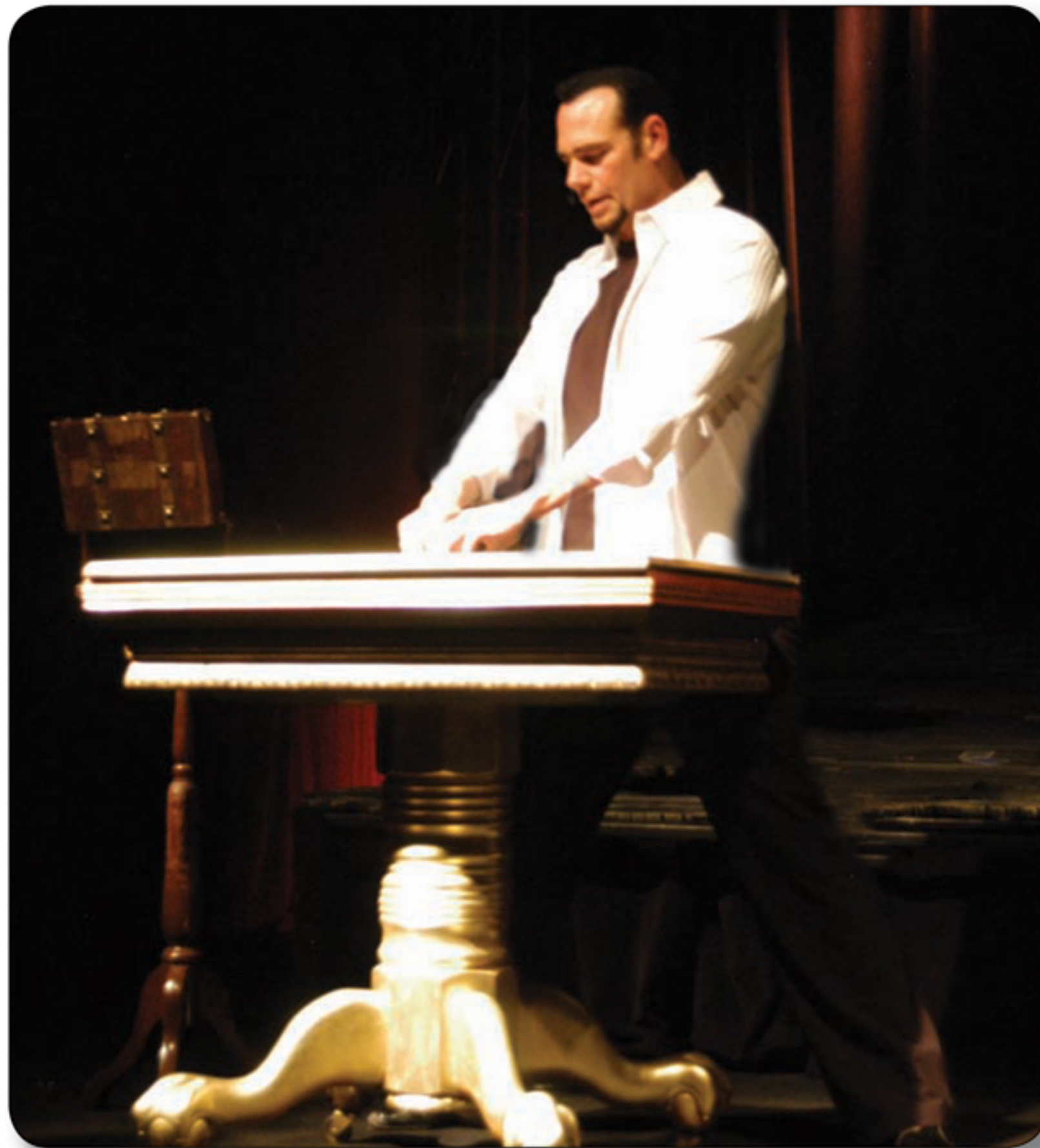
The ill-fated Lester Tiband revisits the scene of the crime

show has been so intricately caught up in a murder mystery. The idea had its roots in Brett's dissatisfaction with playing to the same audiences year after year in Mississippi. "Tunica was a blessing and a curse," Brett said. "We had to do a new show every year, and I felt by that third year it was getting real homogenous, very boxy and standard, so I kind of lost interest in magic. I took about a year off after that. I knew I would have to come up with something different. I didn't know what it was, but I knew it wouldn't simply be different magic tricks. I had the Levitation, Marilyn, Disembodied, all these things that were a little bit different, but a lay audience doesn't perceive that as being different, they just know if they liked it or not. So I decided, what do I enjoy, what do I like? I always liked mysteries. Hitchcock. M. Night Shyamalan's movies. Movies like *Charade* from the early sixties, and *Deathtrap*, with Michael Caine and Christopher Reeve. I always liked movies and plays that had that twist element to them. *The Sixth Sense* was the movie that had the most powerful twist in years, and cinematically other movies have been chasing that twist. So I thought, what a perfect genre. Nobody's done this in a magic show yet. Ironically, in the interim, two movies came out [*The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*]. They were murder mysteries and historical with a twist. They both did the same thing. People who don't know the genesis of this might think we put this together real quick and decided to go with the latest phase, but it's actually a six-year project. So I decided to come up with something that would have a different framework for a magic show. I felt it had to be not illusion, but felt it had to be primarily sleight of hand. That's the genesis of the idea."

In an earlier *Genii* interview, Brett had listed Doug Henning, Shimada, and the Hammers as influences. When asked if anyone in magic influenced him regarding the spooky side of magic, Brett quickly named David Seebach,

who introduced the shows in Waukesha. "When I was a teenager," Brett said, "I helped him with hundreds of shows. I would carry his props around and go over to his house, and we'd talk about magic. We became very close friends. He did a spooky segment in his shows all these years. He would tell a story that was about 10 or 12 minutes long. I asked if he would mind if I sort of went in that direction, where the whole show was a story. Just the idea of telling a spooky story—I asked him for permission to elaborate on that idea. He kindly granted it several years ago. I sent him the original script, and he thought it was good, and we talked about it from there. So David would definitely be a seed of the beginning of the concept."

The concept has matured from the drawing board to the stage, has filled three semis and one theater, has entertained two discerning audiences. Brett and his collaborators will next absorb the audience comments, tweak the show as necessary, assemble and edit video footage, and begin to aggressively market this dark evening of magic and mystery. Las Vegas and London rank high on their list of possible destinations, but suffice it to say that the team will be happy to land anywhere that provides a steady turnover of patrons seeking a night of gloom and doom, magic and mystery, death and dismemberment. A night that begins at the end, as Brett says, choosing his words precisely. Now, if you just turn *Wohscigam* around . . . •



Brett performs close-up legerdemain—samples of Lester Tiband's repertoire