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His magic shows began at Durham's Manbites Dog Theater, where his wife, Melissa, also performs.

photo: Lissa Gotwals

HOMETOWN STORIES

SLEIGHT OF HAND

Hillsborough native Josh Lozoff fuses magic, acting

by Bill Stockard

Josh Lozoff's red bow tie catches the light, glossy playing cards gliding in his hands.

"Paul," Lozoff tells the audience member who's joined him on stage. "Pick a card."

Paul retrieves a card from Lozoff's deck and hands it to him. Helen, Paul's wife of 25 years, stands quietly, waiting to see which card her husband chose.

"Helen," Lozoff says, turning to her. "Did you pick a three of diamonds?"

She smiles and nods. Applause erupts from the audience, and Lozoff bows after another successful game of Connections and Cards, designed to show that two people can select the same card from a deck without speaking. To squelch the Doubting Thomases in the audience, Lozoff is careful to show that Paul and Helen are playing from a real, shuffled deck.

Magic is a way of life for Lozoff, whose one-man show, Parlor Magic, runs the first Friday of each month at the Siena Hotel in Chapel Hill through March. The crowd of 50 or so, seated at circular tables, enjoys an intimacy that Lozoff misses at larger venues.

"It's so interactive that there's never actually a completely honed piece that's the same each time," he says.

His wife, Melissa, serves as director of Parlor Magic, providing advice and helping Lozoff practice — so much so that he refers to her as "the decider." Each performance is designed to be a one-man show, calling on his experience as an actor and magician.

"We treat each show like a theater piece," he says. "But it's a theater piece with a magic theme."

Melissa helps not only with technical direction — such as where he should stand on the stage or how loudly he should speak — but also with development of his stage persona.

"We try to create a character for him," Melissa says.

"He becomes a mysterious magician, and we work to flesh out that character and affect the audience."

A magical success

Lozoff's local magic shows began in Durham's Manbites Dog Theater, where Melissa also performs with theater companies. Up to that point, he primarily had been performing for private parties and in strolling magic shows, where he could establish an immediate connection to his audience.

"I would walk around a cocktail party or reception," Lozoff says of his earlier shows. "I liked the spontaneity and interaction."

His first show at Manbites Dog, in spring 2007, ran for two weeks and sold out. It was such a hit that he returned in 2008 and ran another sold-out performance for four weeks.

Despite the success and positive reviews, Lozoff recognized that something was missing on those stages: a connection that he enjoyed from private receptions.

"I started looking around at nightclub spots, but nothing felt quite right. Then, I talked to the people at the Siena, and they were excited," he says.

The hotel had worked with Lozoff on a few prior events, so when he pitched the idea of Parlor Magic they jumped at the chance.

"We were intrigued by the whole idea, and we thought that this could be a really great thing for the hotel," says Tara Hackman, director of sales and marketing.

"Josh wanted to make it a win-win with some overnight packages," she adds. "He's promoting us by advertising where he's having his show, and he also offers a discount on tickets for those eating at Il Palio (the Siena's restaurant). It really adds a nice atmosphere. He's already maxing out the space we have him in, so I hope he doesn't outgrow us."

Local roots

For Lozoff, it's been quite a journey for a kid from Hillsborough who performed on some well-known Hollywood sets. Although he was born in Michigan, he spent his first birthday at the Daniel Boone Inn in Hillsborough, and his family eventually moved to a farm in the Durham County community of Bahama. The Lozoffs moved to California and Colorado between 1977 and 1981, but then returned to the area, settling in Orange County.

Lozoff began getting serious about acting while performing at the Village Dinner Theater in Raleigh. He starred in "Sparks," a 1985 Saturday morning WRAL-TV show, and even landed a part in the 1988 miniseries "Windmills of the Gods." After graduating from the Carolina Friends School, he moved to Los Angeles in 1989. He met Melissa in an acting class in 1994.

Among his most well-known acting roles were as Gino Tortelli, Carla's son, on several episodes of "Cheers" in the early 1990s, and as Logan in the 1995 hit movie "Clueless."

Lozoff confesses that he missed the initial fanfare over "Clueless" because he was out of the country doing volunteer work.

"I missed the opening because I was in Bolivia," he says. "I called Melissa, who said, 'Are you kidding? It's No. 1 at the box office.'"

Finding a calling

At the height of his acting success, a natural disaster triggered a life change for Lozoff. The Northridge earthquake struck near Los Angeles in January 1994, killing 72, injuring more than 9,000 and causing about \$20 billion in damage. Lozoff volunteered for the American Red Cross in the quake's aftermath. While he volunteered, he continued to receive calls inviting him for auditions, but by then his priorities had changed.

"Those calls felt like they were getting in the way of life," he says.

It was a 1996 trip back to Bolivia that helped shape what he would do next. While there, Lozoff came across a street magician performing in the capital city of La Paz. He was intrigued by the audience's reactions.

"I started watching people watch him," he says. "I had a realization that it was meaningful to watch people react to magic. I picked up a deck of cards and began to pursue a new art form."

Lozoff trained with a family friend who was a professional magician, and soon had crafted a mixture of illusions and sixth-sense connections that have become trademarks of his Parlor Magic show.

"As a magician, you have to appear to have an ability that others don't have, but be likable about it," he says.

"I've practiced card tricks until my fingers got cracked and raw, but that's what makes the experience open to people."

The couple moved to North Carolina in 1999 and got married. While Lozoff honed his magic skills, Melissa acted for Manbites Dog Theater and launched her own local studio, Movie Makers, where she teaches moviemaking and acting classes to children and adults. He also helped pay the bills by becoming an EMT for Orange County, which he continued for six years.

As for the future, Lozoff expects to continue his Parlor Magic show s in some capacity but w ill continue performing at parties. He considers himself extremely fortunate to be able to make a living in such an unusual field. Melissa echoes his gratitude that both are able to earn a living doing something they enjoy.

"Magic had become a hobby, (but) it didn't surprise me that he took it so seriously," she says. "It kind of snuck up on us that he started to do it for a living."

According to Lozoff, his success is the result of both hard work and old-fashioned supply-and-demand economics.

"(Magic) is unusual enough that there's not a lot of competition, but it's desired enough that there are a lot of opportunities," he says.

"At private parties, the second question that I hear after, 'How did you do that?' is 'Can I have your card?'"

Bill Stockard is a freelance writer based in Durham.



ABC11 Eyewitness News anchor Larry Stogner stands in front of the new Durham Performing Arts Center, one of the many things he loves about his adopted city.
photo: Chuck McDaniels, ABC11

READER ESSAY:

Bustling, cosmopolitan, diverse: Why I love Durham

by Larry Stogner

I fondly recall trips to Durham when I was a young boy. Coming from the small town of Yanceyville, Durham seemed huge, with lots of traffic and commerce and a bustling downtown. I'll always remember the sweet smell of tobacco wafting from the myriad warehouses and manufacturing plants across the city.

At shift change, hundreds of factory workers at American Tobacco Co. and Liggett & Myers Tobacco Co. filled the streets and stores downtown, adding to my view that this was a city in motion.

Roll the clock forward to 1976 when I joined ABC11, and to some extent these elements still were there, cranking out Chesterfields, Larks, and Lucky Strikes. But the downtown core was taking a hit as Belk, Sears and a host of smaller clothing stores headed for the suburbs.

A tale of two cities

Raleigh, as a town not defined by manufacturing, had a much different feel. It was a state government town with a bit of a yuppie character that, to me, lacked some of the grittiness that I've come to love about Durham.

The two cities have always had very different rhythms, with Durham offering a diversity of cultures and lifestyles and a unique sense of place. And, to some extent, that's how it continues to set itself apart.

And talk about a renaissance. The big parking lot for those American Tobacco workers who made cigarettes night and day now is the site of the Durham Bulls Athletic Park. And the adjacent factories that gathered weeds for decades now are the centerpiece of the American Tobacco Campus, a totally transformed complex of shops, offices and restaurants. Across the tracks, the old Liggett & Myers property is part of that renaissance, also providing retail, office, apartments and condominiums.

What Durham offers newcomers

Folks moving here quickly find that they get a much better bang for the buck buying a home in Durham, where they also can avoid Interstates 40 and 540 during rush hour.

I made my decision on where to buy a home based on its proximity to my workplace, the main studios of WTVD/ABC11 in downtown Durham. I wanted to be close enough to go home for dinner between the 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. news casts. I built a new house five years ago, but it's still in Durham. And the neighborhood is even more diverse. I have neighbors from Jordan, China, India and Scotland.

Durham has arrived due to a renaissance that has encompassed much of the downtown area. The ballpark, as well as the new Durham Performing Arts Center (DPAC) and its wonderful array of Broadway shows, the city's gleaming new transportation hub and adjacent train station, a planned new county government complex, and hundreds of new downtown apartments and condos are bringing new life to a once-abandoned downtown.

I have no idea how or why it happened, but over the past two decades Durham has become the Triangle's gastronomic epicenter. From Magnolia Grill to Restaurant Eden to Revolution, the city has managed to attract some of the best chefs and restaurant entrepreneurs in the country. I'm pleasantly surprised to quite often see friends from Raleigh or Chapel Hill dining at Rue Cler or Parizade. And now

Fifteen501 - Durham, Chatham and Oran...
my old friend, Giorgios Bakatsias, is about to open another new eatery in West Village.

A decade ago, I had some doubts about Durham. No more. Thanks to the vision of civic leaders, a handful of developers, the chamber of commerce and the people at Downtown Durham Inc., the city is growing again, and it's becoming more pleasing to the eye. I now find it easy to be bullish on the Bull City.

Larry Stogner, senior broadcast journalist, joined ABC11 Eyewitness News in 1976. In 1982, he was named anchor of the 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. newscasts, and continues to anchor Eyewitness News at 5 p.m. and 6 p.m.

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