



# THE STORM *Before* THE CALM

A BACKSTAGE LOOK AT THE MAKING OF THE  
*MILLION-DOLLAR MAGIC SHOW* FOR THE NEW  
CARNIVAL MAGIC CRUISE SHIP — A STORY OF  
*POWER, MONEY, SEX, AND DANGER*







..... BY MARK KORNHAUSER .....

The *Carnival Magic* embarked on its maiden voyage on May 1, 2011. The ship cost \$740 million and has the capacity for 3,646 passengers and 1,367 crew. It is three football fields long and weighs 260 million pounds — that's twice the tonnage of the *QE2* and almost three times the size of the *Titanic*.

About two years ago, while the ship was being built in Italy, someone must have said "Hey, we should have a magic show on this ship."

The next logical step was to ask Kevin Jeffrey and Gus Carrilo of Kevin & Caruso to co-produce the show with Carnival.

Kevin & Caruso started with Carnival in 1995 and have been on an airplane and a ship every week for the last sixteen years. Kevin and Caruso each have two million miles with American Airlines. (In case you're wondering, once you get to two million miles, American sends you a luggage tag.)





In 1999, Carnival let Kevin & Caruso build their own full-length magic show using the full cast of onboard dancers, and it soon became one of the highest-rated production shows on the Carnival fleet. It is still running on the *Carnival Triumph*. In 2002, they created another magic show, this time on the *Carnival Conquest*. The show featured Deborah Sur for the first five years, and now features Lady Hellevi. Kevin & Caruso produced a third show in 2009 on the *Carnival Glory*, with Justin Illusion as the headliner. They also produce a midnight *Burlesque* show for two of the Carnival Ships.

Concurrent with all the above, Kevin & Caruso performed weekly for seven years in Miami Beach at the Marco Polo and then at the Deauville Hotel. They handled every aspect of the marketing, mostly on the Internet, as well as the box office, which was Kevin's personal cell phone. During the show, they ran the sound and lights backstage from a laptop.

With three successful, long-running magic shows currently on the Carnival line, Kevin pitched the idea of a new show to the Carnival higher-ups. They liked it. Naturally, they made him agonize a bit, something I presume you learn in business school, but finally they said something like, "Okay, we've got about a million dollars. What can you do?" Actually, I've taken a bit of literary license here. Carnival originally wanted to spend about \$500,000 but they ended up going over budget to about \$740,000 and then there were some additional expenses — so let's call it a million.

Econ 101: a million dollars is good. This was a much bigger budget than the team had worked with before. Kevin proposed a slick, rock-'n'-roll, headliner-style magic show. He liked the idea of an amped-up version of the lower budget shows he had produced for Carnival in the past. Jason Byrne was pitched as the headliner. Jason has a great look, a great act, and was yearning to do something

*A large top hat raised into place on the table, then dropped to reveal the girl.*

beyond his twice-nightly manipulation act in Las Vegas. Kevin and Jason had been looking for projects to work on together, and this was a perfect opportunity. "Jason deserves it," says Kevin. "I love his style."

A dream come true. A serendipitous concatenation of show business good fortune and synchronous artistic desires.

Carnival had other ideas.

Carnival Cruise Lines has 26 ships in the Carnival fleet and owns 100 ships worldwide. They have produced hundreds of big production shows in-house. They are the most successful cruise line in the world. They do things their way. Carnival felt it should be a magic-themed show with no boxes, maybe a flying carpet, singers and dancers, and a storyline about — well, something magical. "Dancers move so much better than magicians. Do we really even need a magician?"



Kevin, no fool, tried to explain that this was not the time or place to try to reinvent the art form. Others had tried to eliminate boxes, develop a storyline, and combine singing and dancing, but had not succeeded in producing a great magic show. He thought about abandoning the project to preserve his artistic integrity. After about a millisecond, however, he agreed to The Great Compromise.

It would be a hybrid show. It would also be the largest show ever staged on a Carnival ship. Jason Byrne would be the star, but there'd be strong thematic elements and lots of dancing, singing, and production value. It would be a joint venture. Kevin's team and the Carnival team would work in creative harmony.

One initial disappointment was that Carnival didn't want Jason to do his dove act in the show. Because the show could conceivably run for five to ten years, they wanted to know they could replace him if he decided to leave after two years. Hey, if you had to put shows on 26 ships you might say the same thing. But I doubt it.

Taking the doves out of a dove act is like taking the chocolate out of a Hershey bar.

But a million bucks goes a long way. A couple of hundred thousand dollars was spent on illusions, and the rest on elaborate sets, costumes, pyrotechnics, lasers, original music, choreography, rehearsals, etc.

Every other month, the creative team met in Miami and went over the thirty-page script that Kevin provided. They named the show *Destination Unknown* — a little cringe-worthy by some standards and perhaps a little prophetic, but better than an earlier title consideration: *Poof*. Which reminds me of Herbert Beerbohm Tree's line, "A committee should consist of three men, two of whom are absent."

As the deadline approached, rehearsals were held in Las Vegas and Miami for the cast of fifteen dancers and singers.

Illusion builder Bill Smith sent out a forty-foot container of props and met up with it in Italy for a quick installation. Three other containers filled with tons of set pieces, costumes, and pyro equipment were also shipped off to Italy, where the maiden voyage would begin. So far, so good.

Jason Byrne is well known to the magic community. He is a two-time winner of the Magic Castle's Stage Magician of the Year Award, and the Siegfried & Roy Golden Lion's Head Award. He has performed at the Lido in Paris, the Wintergarten in Berlin, the Shinagawa Prince Hotel in Japan. For the past eight years, he has been performing a stunning nine-minute dove and manipula-



In the *Laser Tightrope* illusion, Jason Byrne breaks the beam of light with his hand, then coaxes the dancer to walk toward him atop the beam.

tion act in *V: The Ultimate Variety Show* at Planet Hollywood in Las Vegas. Ten to twelve shows a week. Steady work. Very steady. Very, very steady.

Even a magician's dream job can become boring and Sisyphean after thousands of repetitions. (Sisyphus? The guy who had the awfully tedious task of rolling a rock up and down a mountain for all eternity. Sisyphus cheated Death, Zeus got annoyed; same old story.)

Jason was ready for a change. It was about two years from the time Jason and Kevin first talked about the Carnival Magic

Project until the day the show opened. In the very early stages of the project, Jason was *in* — the charismatic star of a million-dollar show. And then he was *out* — "What if we need to replace him? Can't we just use a dancer?" The Carnival bigwigs came to Vegas and saw Jason destroy the audience at Planet Hollywood with a killer strong show. When they looked out the window of their room at Mandalay Bay, they were facing a billboard with a fourteen-foot picture of Jason's face on it. Jason was literally the poster boy for the V show. The execs at Carnival decided he



was worth the extra expense. He was back in, but he would not be doing the act that he had honed for the past twenty years. He knew that would require going beyond his comfort zone, but he was confident in Kevin and Caruso as producers.

Kevin brought in a strong team. Mistinguett was hired as choreographer/director. Bill Smith of Magic Ventures was given the contract for the illusions. Bill then brought in Starr to do the scenic design of the props. A very competent and experienced group of Carnival staff and contractors was already in place for costumes, pyrotechnics, laser system, sets and scenery, and lighting design. Practically every marketing and entertainment director right up to the CEO of Carnival corporate, Gerry Cahill, seemed to be involved. A lot of chefs in the kitchen.

Excitement and anxiety mounted for Jason as the weeks and months rolled by. Drawings of props, costume designs, set designs, and custom music were all being prepared for a show on a three-quarter-billion-dollar ship that was not yet finished. By the time the cast and crew would board the ship in Italy, there would be less than two weeks before the first show. It would take fourteen technicians to install the show and eight to keep it running.

All of the material in the show was new for Jason, so he set himself to the task of attending to as many details as he could. He built dozens of custom gimmicks and rebuilt dozens of small pieces of magic as well. Jason felt it was important to have some sleight of hand in the show, and he found a spot to add a manipulation sequence with roses. Many hundreds of hours later, Jason had an original, sophisticated, and flashy rose manipulation routine that had silks, torches, and roses appearing and animating in highly complex ways. Magnets, reels, threads, and custom-crafted metal holdouts were lined in Jason's jacket, shirt, and pants. What could possibly go wrong?

Carnival wanted the music for the show to have a "familiar feel" to it. Kevin preferred to avoid using instantly recognizable songs. From his point of view, familiar music is inescapably "dated." The music doesn't have to be recognizable, it just has to provide the appropriate feel for the illusion. In the end, Kevin and Carnival found middle ground — sort of. Carnival's music director Nick Thorpe combined familiar and more novel pieces of music into something fresh. But the odd blend of contemporary music and the '80s throwbacks was eerily reminiscent of Dick Foster's *Spellbound*.


Mistinguett is a well-known choreographer and director who worked 25 years in those capacities for Greg Thompson Productions. She has directed more production shows than anyone and has an endless supply of creative ideas. She approaches the stage as a blank canvas, and works with the unique talents and looks of the individual dancers. "Magic shows are not choreographed the same way as other production numbers. You work from the trick out," she says. "It's not simply a string of eight counts."

Because of the physical requirements of magic, it takes many repetitions in rehearsal to establish pace consistently. Unfortunately, they were required to quickly establish precise light, sound, and pyrotechnic cues for the "permanent" automated timecode. It was an arduous and tiring process for all involved. Mistinguett ended up with an exceptional product. But like sausages and laws, it's sometimes best not to see how they're made. The dancers were rehearsing for three different shows and reached points of exhaustion that do not always allow for civilities.

The Great Compromise presented its own challenges. Before rehearsals began, Kevin was opposed to Carnival's idea of having live singers perform in the show. It would be a distraction. But as he gained appreciation for the talents of the Carnival production staff and cast, he started to believe that it would be "fine." He was, prior to the show, "neutral to the idea." He thought of it as "a sprinkle that would not hurt the show" and he "might even consider using it in future shows." Once the show opened, though, Kevin's position reverted to his original thinking: the structure of a powerful magic show should not have the distractions of other leading characters. A thorough discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of a magic show and its relationship to theater as explicated by Henning Nelms was probably not a consideration. The singing now remains in the show, but if there is indeed a serious flaw in the production, it is in the structure and focus of the magic itself. Without proper structure and focus, magic risks being reduced to a special effect.

When I asked Kevin what part of the show he was most worried about, he answered simply, "The finale."

"You mean," I prodded, "the eighteen-foot scorpion that emerges from an elevator and cuts Jason in half with its mechanical



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Some of the major illusions Jason performs in the show include *Appearing Helicopter*, *Stretcher*, and a *levitation above the spinning blades of a giant fan*.









stinger, right before Jason comes in from the back of the room on a slide-for-life?"

"Yeah, that one."

Kevin had been on the ship in Italy for just two days when he tested a trap door and fell through to the bottom of a twelve-foot elevator. Fortunately, he bounced a few times on

the metal scorpion on the way down. Some blame was passed around, but mostly Kevin took a lot of Advil.

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Long, long hours in the ship's theater followed. Dancers cried, men groaned, tempers flared, feelings were hurt, and doubts nagged tired minds. My only regret is that I wasn't there.

There are thirteen illusions in the 45-minute show, including versions of Eclipse and Sands of Egypt, a Buzzsaw, Twister, Girl from Top Hat production, and Jason's levitation over a large whirling fan. The illusion Kevin is proudest of is the laser tightrope, which was the legacy of Richard Tutacko, whom Kevin credits as an early mentor. Richard passed away in 1991 at the age of 31, after

*Jason performs the Clear Buzz Saw. [Below] Show producers Kevin Jeffrey and Gus Carrilo.*

a brief but bright career with a show called *Night Magic*.

On the special, televised maiden-voyage celebration, before the debut of the show, Carnival CEO Gerry Cahill was to magically appear inside a helicopter, one of Mike Michaels' beautiful props. Five hundred people were onboard for this special prelaunch ceremony. A problem with some pneumatic something or other was not allowing the helicopter illusion to function properly. Just as they were about to cancel, the problem was solved one minute before show time. Kevin Tweeted, "Was shitting myself all day."

On opening night, the slide-for-life was out — the prop had not yet been repaired, and Jason's ribs were still aching from his fall. But the part he cared about the most was the rose routine, his *piece de resistance* — a handcrafted, meticulous, wonderfully rich ninety seconds of





*Jason with the Scorpion and Circle of Shadow illusions. A toast from the production team: costume designers Lucio Boliver and Jim Buckovich, Gus, Jason, Kevin, Mistinguett, and Bill Smith.*

manipulation. If only he'd gotten his opening costume on time. There'd been so much going on, so many long days, so few opportunities to rehearse the details. And then -

Something stuck, something released, something wasn't where it was supposed to be. Jason smiled a few extra times and got through it.

Opening night was a huge success by almost every measure. The finicky CEO was pleased. There was high praise all around. The *London Times* wrote: "The razzmatazz is West End." And the instant reviews from the online Cruise Critic included the following assessment: "They have once again given magic the respect it deserves as a headlining act."

Kevin knew that dozens of fixes were still needed, but he also knew that the next cruise was sold out and he could count on the ultra-efficient production manager Kerry Stables and the meticulous Jason to do the worrying for him.

Before Kevin left for Italy, I'd asked him what he would have done differently in creating the show. "Next time," he said, "there needs to be one person in charge of the timeline. This time, everyone had their own timelines. That didn't always work. And I'd spend more of the budget on consulting and the magic. We took risks in many areas, but not so much in developing original illusions." All along, he did not expect to achieve everything they'd asked and hoped for. "We intentionally overbuilt the show; achieving eighty percent of what we planned would be great."

But that's a goal for the future. Right now, it's show time. The big show bell in the sky rings. All systems are go. Four hundred dollars of pyrotechnic expendables mix with lasers and state-of-the-art lighting. By the time the scorpion rises from the elevator, and the heroic magician rescues the scantily clad human sacrifice, the audience has long since suspended disbelief. It's downright psychedelic. And the rose routine looks great — two standing ovations.

Finally, it's time for the midnight buffet. The storm is over. **M**

*Mark Kornhauser is a comedy magician living in Las Vegas with his two lovely dogs, Zsa Zsa and Goulash, and he loves hearing about other people's anxiety and stress. Destination Unknown is scheduled to play the Carnival Magic for an indefinite period. Jason Byrne is under contract with the show for the next two years.*



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