

A MAGICAL EVENING

Prestidigitators boggle the mind during return engagement at CEPA

Written by **LOYD MCINTOSH**
Photos Courtesy of **PELL CITY CEPA**

There is a quote attributed to the 20th century actress and comedian Fanny Brice that goes something like this: "Love is like a card trick. After you know how it works, it's no fun anymore."

Brice's theory was put to the test as the Center for Education and Performing Arts (CEPA) in Pell City hosted A Magical Evening. Led by local magician and motivational speaker Brian Reaves and featuring some of the best magicians from the Birmingham area, A Magical Evening gave the audience glimpses of many types of magic and illusion, often incorporating audience members in the setup and resolution of the trick. However, where the cast of characters truly excelled was in close-up magic and sleight of hand, especially card tricks, a fascination for Reaves for many years.

"I saw someone do a close-up card trick for me when I was 22, and I was just so fascinated by it, I had to learn how to do it," he says. He left work that afternoon and drove 30 minutes to the nearest bookstore and bought the only magic book on the shelves, a book on card tricks. "I just started learning from there."

One of the highlights of the evening was in the second act as veteran magician Tommy Ellison called John Rea, city attorney for Pell City, and his wife Sonja to the stage for what he called the "11-dollar bill trick." Created by Scandinavian card trick expert Fred Kapps, Ellison first saw the trick performed by Stephen Bargatze, a card-trick expert and father of comedian Nate Bargatze. After discovering how the trick is performed, Ellison reworked the trick using \$1 bills and, keeping the code of secrecy common among magicians, wouldn't



Brian Reaves





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divulge to me how the trick works.

"You're not really expecting me to tell you how it works, are you?" Ellison said in a Southern drawl with a self-described hint of curmudgeon thrown in for good measure. "I'd have to kill ya' if I did that."

Ellison set up the gag by playfully joking with the Reas about who handles the money in the family, before digging into the heart of the trick, counting dollars back and forth to John and Sonja, each time doling one or two dollars more or less than what should have been in the stack, much to the delight of the Reas and the audience. The bit was as much a stand-up comedy routine as it was a magic trick.

"I like it because it uses two people from the audience to create some natural comedy between a married couple when you kind of gently pit them against one another," says Ellison. "You just use a bunch of dollar



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Noa with audience member Curist Gossett



bills and a wallet and a bunch of schtick, you know.”

Also performing was Brandon Herring, aka Mr. B., the only magician on the program specifically aimed at kids. Herring performed two tricks that evening, including a take on the “bullet trick” developed by a magician named Christopher T. Herring in which he catches a bullet fired from a rifle in his mouth.

Herring obtained permission to perform the trick from Christopher T., he’s modified it for kids. In Herring’s CEPA performance, he had two girls from the audience sign their initials on each side of a dime, then stuffed it inside a roll of toilet paper. The roll was then placed on a paint rollers attached to the end of a leaf blower in which another volunteer, a teenage boy in this case, started the blower on Herring’s cue, and as toilet paper flew all over the stage, Herring caught the signed dime in his mouth.

However, Herring truly dazzled on a trick of his own creation, a “wall” of Rubik’s Cubes. For the trick, Herring asks audience members, mostly kids, to scramble a new Rubik’s Cube from the wall of cubes leaving an empty space in the wall. At the end of the trick, Herring replaces the cube into the space to reveal it matches the pattern created by the other random scrambled cubes inserted into the wall.

“That trick was about four years of polishing. It’s taken me a very long time to perfect that trick,” explains Herring, who added that his Rubik’s Cube trick has several variations depending on the audience. He also the trick was created by combining parts of other tricks that just weren’t working.

“What I did was take one principle from a trick that I didn’t really like and a principle from another trick I didn’t like,” he says, “and I meshed those two together, and that’s what I came up with.”

Other magicians included mentalist Tony Dixon, who performed a mind-reading trick on Pell City resident Joanna Darden. For the trick, Dixon instructed Darden to flip through a book and choose a random word while he faced the audience. Moments later, he accurately guessed the word Darden selected – “dermatologist.”

The only female magician on the cast, going by the stage name Noa, created some temporary concern in Pell City resident Curtis Gossett before cutting open a lemon to reveal his “missing” \$20 bill. Other magicians included a young up-and-comer, Patton Guillen, a card-trick expert from

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Bentley Burns



Brandon Herring

Vestavia Hills, and Bentley Burns, an illusionist from Mississippi who made a table levitate and fly around the CEPA stage with the help of a young volunteer.

The magicians also were available for a meet-and-greet prior to the start of the show, demonstrating card tricks and other up-close magic for the next generation of illusionists and card-trick artists in what was a magical evening for everyone.

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