

LIGHTS. **VEGAS** ACTION.

Q & A

with Nathan Burton

Interviewed by Caroline Fontein

Comedy magician Nathan Burton is making his mark in Las Vegas in more ways than one. Aside from his show, "Nathan Burton Comedy Magic," this entertainer is making himself known in a more literal sense.

"They have my giant head on the front of the building right next to where Toni Braxton used to be," said Burton regarding his building wrap that was recently put up at the Flamingo.

His show moved to the Flamingo in April of this year, but Burton is no stranger to Las Vegas. He started performing on the Strip with "Showgirls of Magic" in 2001, and two years later he moved to "V-The Ultimate Variety Show," first at the Venetian and then at Planet Hollywood.

Before performing in Vegas, Burton was featured on NBC's "The World's Wildest Magic" in 1996, where he wowed audiences with his comedy infused magic. The overwhelming response to his performance led to a second appearance the following year on the network's other magic special, "World's Greatest Magic 3."

In 2005, Burton was the only featured magician on E! Entertainment's "The Entertainer," starring Wayne Newton. Later that same year, he captivated audiences worldwide with his self-contrived "Ultimate Las Vegas Showgirl Challenge" where he spent seven nights inside a sealed box with seven showgirls. A year later, his show, "Nathan Burton Comedy Magic" debuted at the V Theater in what is now Planet Hollywood. Six weeks after opening his show, Burton returned to national television to compete in NBC's hit series "America's Got Talent."

After a successful run at the V Theater, Burton moved to his current location where he performs his family-friendly afternoon comedy magic show. He recently received the prestigious Merlin Award as the Best Comedy Illusionist of 2008. The award was presented by the International Magicians Society, the largest magic society in the world according to the Guinness Book of World Records. Past award recipients include: Siegfried & Roy, David Copperfield, Criss Angel and Penn & Teller among others.

What made you decide to become a magician?

I got my first magic trick when I was four. My mom gave me this trick where you put a nickel in a box and you close it and when you open it up it becomes a dime. I was like, hey I am always doubling my money, and I'd love to be a magician and have my own show in Vegas someday.

Where do you get the ideas for the different illusions in your show?

It kind of hits me anywhere. When I came up with the Barbie girl illusion and the giant hairdryer, I heard this song on the radio, "I'm a Barbie Girl," and I was like I should do a big thing with a Barbie doll and make a girl appear and then levitate her on a bunch of hairdryers... Everything in the show is very close to me personally. It is a character on stage. Definitely off stage I am much quieter and not as crazy. For the most part everything is very personal to me or comes from my childhood or some story in my life or there is something that is associated one way or the other.

What inspired you to create the gigantic blow-dryer that you use in your show?

Originally I wanted to levitate a girl, but levitating a girl has been done for one hundred years, it's not cutting edge. So I was thinking I want to do something fun and make it updated. I was thinking what if I have 30 little hair dryers, and I turned them on and levitated a Barbie doll. Then I thought what would be funnier is a giant one, with music playing and then you uncover this massive hair dryer. I actually built two of them. The first one did not really work, and I built the second one. All of our stuff is original stuff so we have to build prototypes and finally get it to work and then put it in the show.

Once you have an idea for an illusion what process do you go through before it becomes a part of the show?

You start out with a blank sheet of paper and we start drawing out ideas. We try to figure out as much as we can ahead of time. Then we go into the shop and build it. Sometimes we build two or three of them until we finally get a finished project. Then we take that to the rehearsal studio where we rehearse music and the girls. Then eventually it goes into the show and hopefully it does well. Some things go in the first time and they are great and sometimes you just come up with something and it never, never works... Most of my stuff has never been built before and never even tried, and we just have to try it and see if it works or not.

Have you ever had to apply any of those inventions to your life outside of the show? For instance, maybe you had a blind date gone wrong or a really bad hair day?

Luckily, most of the illusions are so big that they very rarely ever leave the theater, but everything carries over to my personal life. If it's a day off then we are definitely working on new stuff or doing a promo for the show... It's my show and it engulfs my life and everything that I do.

How did being featured on NBC's "World's Greatest Magic," E! Entertainment's "The Entertainer," and "America's Got Talent" influence your career and your magic?

Well, being on television sells tickets and it's extremely powerful... It's a huge impact. It's really crazy because on one spot on a national television show, more people see me than ever saw Houdini perform in his whole entire life. So that's really surreal, how powerful television is. It's funny, a lot of people watch it and they still come up to me and say I saw you in this show, and I just wanted to come see you. It's really crazy.

Do you prefer performing on television or in front of a live audience?

Well there are totally different things. Television is a totally different beast. In my own show I have a little bit more freedom. Television is usually very structured and there's usually millions of dollars involved every couple of hours... For my live show I have more freedom. It's my show, and I can do whatever I want. I can add a new trick in. I have a little more freedom when I bring a kid on stage to ask him about his dream date. You never know where it's going to end up.

You integrate the audience into several of your illusions. Has anyone ever had a really strange reaction or done something funny that stands out in your mind?

Once I had a kid who was four years old come up on stage. I thought he was going to be extremely shy, and he would just take the microphone. I asked him what his favorite movie was and he was like, my favorite movie is 'Bridge to Terabithia,' and he sat there for five minutes and described the whole movie and the audience was just going nuts... No one ever asks 'was that a plant?' because you can tell with kids when they are being genuine... When I get a kid that's really bad, the audience will come up to me and be like, oh that kid was really tough, but they still like it. You never know what you are going to get... It's hard to prepare for the unexpected. You try to do your best job and try to make it as entertaining as possible.

What was the most challenging part of your stunt, "The Las Vegas Showgirl Challenge" where you spent seven days locked in a box with



Nathan Burton combines comedy and stunning illusions for a fun-filled revue that audiences of all ages can enjoy.

Photo courtesy of Flamingo

seven showgirls?

That was a one-time-only seven days, no food or water and a box of showgirls... It's funny because people say, what was it like being in there with all those girls, it must have been great. It was fun for a little bit and then it was like being trapped in 'The View' and girls just talking about their boyfriends and why doesn't he talk to me more and why doesn't he want to hang out... The best part was when the girls would actually leave at night, and I would actually be in there alone for a couple of hours just to chill out because it was non-stop. It was definitely the most challenging thing I've ever done... It was pretty wild.

How did you feel after it was all done and you were out of the box?

Actually, I went to the hospital and I was dehydrated and all that. Once I finally made it home, it was funny. The first night I slept in my actual bed I woke up and thought I saw plexiglass around the bed because I was just in this box. It was very small and with eight people in there, it's very tiny. It was really surreal.

How has your show changed since moving to a bigger venue at the Flamingo?

Well, when I was on "America's Got Talent" I met the set designer from "American Idol" who was also a magic fan, and we started talking... He was like, if you every do a big show let me know and he would design the set... Now we have a bigger and new set and we've changed some of the costumes. We've just tried to improve the show overall and add bigger and better stuff. The showroom is amazing. It's old school Vegas, it's been around for so long...The way the seating is tiered, it's great. I love the room and the Flamingo is great. They have been extremely supportive.

What do you like to do in Las Vegas when you are not performing?

That's the best part about Las Vegas -- there is so much stuff to do here. I love going to shows. I love going to movies. I like finding the places that not all the tourists know about to hang out... There's always something to do, whether it's a great show or a great restaurant.

What do you do to stay inspired as a performer and as a way to continue to be creative with coming up with new illusions?

People from L.A. when they come to Vegas what do they do? They come, they get a great room, they go to the pool all day and hopefully they'll come and see my show before they go out to dinner and the clubs. I try to remember that they are only going to see my show once. We do have a lot of repeat people, but for the most part they are only going to see the show once... If I see a show and that's the only time I going to see it, I want to see the best show possible. So I try to remember, even if I am sick and I don't feel well, it's like these people are here, they're on vacation and they want to have a great time, and there's no reason why they shouldn't get the best show possible. That's my goal with the show, to keep it the best it can be every single day.

What do you try to bring to the art of magic that sets you apart from other magicians on the Strip?

I try to do something a little different, not the same old tricks. I try to take a twist to it. Instead of levitating a girl I use a hairdryer... I try to do stuff that I would like to watch. I keep the show fast and fun and playful. It's not too serious. If I come to Vegas, I want to gamble and I want to go eat and have a great time and laugh. That's what it's all about, just having a great time...It's a magic show, it's not life changing. It's an hour and hopefully you have fun, laugh and have a great time. If that's what happens, then I'm happy.

We know magicians are always working on doing bigger and better illusions. Do you have anything up your sleeves or changes in your show that you would like to tell me about?

We are always trying to improve the show, and we are always working on new stunts... I can't give everything out, but we are working on a stunt with 100 showgirls that's going to happen at the Flamingo.

If you could make anyone disappear who would it be?

Probably, whoever is raising the price of gas. Whoever is increasing it, I would make them disappear, so I can help everybody drive because everybody drives from L.A. and we want all those L.A. people to come in. Tell them we miss them and carpool. That's what everyone should do in L.A., grab their buddies and jump in a car and come to Vegas.