

INTERNATIONAL MAGIC MAGAZINE

VANISH

JULY
2020

ISSUE 72





THE MAGIC WAVE

JOHN FERRENTINO BY NICK LEWIN

Back in the '80s, when comedy clubs were at their peak, there were a handful of performers whose 8X10 photos would inevitably spring up on the walls of the showrooms. One of them was John Ferrentino. John has had a fascinating and successful career, continually reinventing himself and adapting his show to changing times. I recently had the opportunity to interview John and catch up with the latest, somewhat surprising, trajectory in his illustrious career. He also shared some great advice for younger magicians that is sage, simple, and priceless.

Most magicians can trace their interest in magic back to the gift of a magic set; for Ferrentino, this happened at the age of seven when his Grandfather gifted him an elaborate box of magic tricks. However, John's interest in magic quickly fell dormant as he became absorbed in the process of growing up and learning a "legitimate" trade. Upon graduation, Ferrentino became an x-ray technician at Albert Einstein's College of Medicine in New York. He seemed to have forgotten conjuring, but under the surface, his love of magic was still smoldering and waiting to become reignited.

When he was 23 years old, Ferrentino saw a street magician performing the Chinese Linking Rings on the steps in front of the New York City Library. He was instantly captivated by this performance and went straight to Tannen's Magic Shop, where he bought a set of Linking Rings. He spent the next two years working on those six-inch linking rings. "I didn't know how to do any magic, but I was good at linking rings," Ferrentino jokes. John's interest in magic had become rekindled. "At this time, I was only performing serious magic," Says Ferrentino. "I did

not know that magic could be funny." It was not long before John discovered exactly how funny his magic could become.

Someone opened up a comedy club in John's neighborhood, and before long, Ferrentino found himself performing there along with six other Long Island comedy performers. The group included another young rookie performer named Eddie Murphy. He quickly formed a strong bond with the young comics. Sitting backstage in the green room with the comedians between sets, they would quiz John on his act, asking him questions like, "How do you do that trick where the cane appears?" "I'd show them," says John, "but I would add little comments like, it's easy—\$29.95. I just made fun of the magic I was doing to make the comedians laugh." These backstage moments were the birth of the deadpan sarcasm that became John's trademark in the comedy world.

Ferrentino quickly became a favorite with local audiences and even began to perform larger shows for the New York Islanders ice hockey team. He began expanding his act, mixing dove work with larger illusions such as the Crystal Casket and a Sword Suspension. "I even had special costumes made," says John. "I dressed like a king-sized Doug Henning!" However, one night while putting his Zig Zag away, he had an epiphany upon realizing that it took an hour to put the prop together and then another hour to break it down. He quickly decided to create a show where he worked out of one bag that contained all his props.

A big break arrived for Ferrentino when Coors Lite wanted to enter the college comedy scene and put together a team of seven comedy acts



A STEP AHEAD

"I'VE ALWAYS HAD A VERY SUCCESSFUL CAREER BECAUSE I STAYED ONE STEP AHEAD OF WHAT WAS GOING ON."

performing as the Coors Lite Comedy Commandos. This booking extended into a five-year run for Ferrentino. Another breakthrough arrived with a booking at the 3,500 seat Westbury Music Fair as the opening act for David Crosby and Graham Nash. How the engagement came about is a classic showbiz story. Ferrentino's mother had become extremely sick, and John's manager called up all the Long Island clubs and arranged for him to work every possible local club, at a discounted fee, so that he could remain close to her.

Meanwhile, ticket sales were moving rather slowly for Crosby & Nash. The theater manager panicked and decided to sweeten the bill by adding this young comedy magician who seemed to be Long Island's busiest and most popular entertainer. From all his bookings, the manager assumed that Ferrentino was a huge local draw. "Book this guy," said the theater manager, and John got his first theater booking. The concert was a big success, and Crosby and Nash asked John if he was free to work with them the following night.

However, the next night's show almost didn't happen because while driving to the gig, Ferrentino's car overheated and eventually broke down. John had to rent a car and arrived at the venue at 8:00 PM, the exact time he was supposed to begin

his show. Initially, the theater manager wanted to eliminate the opening set, but Dave Crosby said, "Hey, the kid is funny—let him do his show." So John was ushered out onstage without even having his props there to accompany him; he then performed his first-ever pure comedy monologue until someone passed his case out to him onstage.



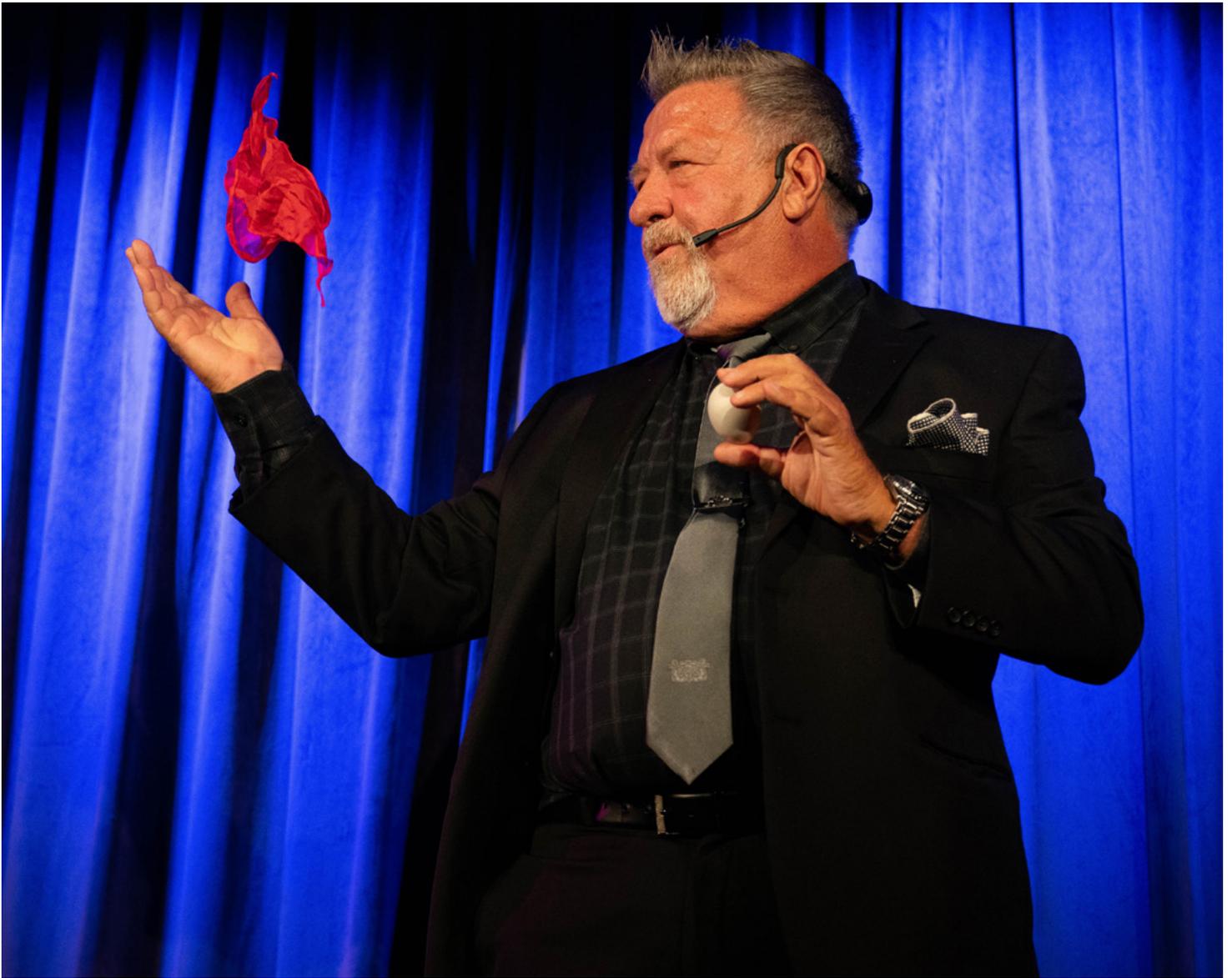
The show went well until John's final effect, the Sword Through Neck, using a girl from the audience to assist him on stage. When Ferrentino demonstrated how the blade passed right through the neck brace, his assistant panicked, she didn't just panic; she rather obviously urinated on stage much to the audience's delight. "I thought it was the worst day of my life," says John, "I walked off stage, not knowing what to expect, and Crosby was lying on a couch convulsed in laughter." He looked up at me and said, "Dude, anyone who can make someone pee themselves with laughter is going to be our new permanent opening act." The gig was so successful that it eventually blossomed into a series of bookings with different permutations of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young that lasted almost an entire decade. Along with these gigs, and the Coors Lite Comedy Commandos, John was starting to arrive as a performer.

Inevitably Ferrentino began hitting the TV circuit, starting with 21 appearances on the New York based show Comedy Tonight



EARLY PUBLICITY PHOTOS





on the Fox Network. When Rick Messina, the show's talent coordinator, moved to Los Angeles and became the booker for *Comic Strip Live*, John was one of the acts he brought with him, and John made 16 appearances on the new comedy show. In total, John made over 50 appearances on various TV shows, which further cemented his standing as one of America's most commercial performers. In addition to his premium comedy club bookings, John quickly became a highly sought after corporate entertainer.

In 2000 Ferrentino moved to Florida and began to book about four cruise ship engagements a year with Norwegian Cruise Line in order to enjoy mini-vacations with his family. John's move to Florida was convenient for his cruise dates, and it allowed him to continue surfing, one of his long term hobbies. He became so popular with cruise ship audiences that eventually NCL made him an offer he couldn't refuse. By the time comedy clubs were starting to die

down, he was booking more and more cruises. By 1994 John was working with the line for six months a year with a peachy two weeks on/two weeks off contract. When Disney Cruise Line launched their "Magic" ship, he was lured over to the company to spearhead their entertainment schedule.

In 2016 John saw Michael and Eugene Berger perform in their *Dark Stories* show at the Genii Convention in Orlando, and the first germ of a seance show sparked in his mind. During the convention, Max Maven persuaded John to perform at the Magic Castle, which would be for the first time in 30 years. "Working the Castle brought me back my love of magic again," says John. "After so many years as a comedian, presenting comedy magic, I had almost forgotten why I wanted to be a magician in the first place. Working at the Castle, I rediscovered how much people love magic. It stirred something inside of me, and I realized that people's belief in magic was a wonderful experience. In-

stead of my show just being me and a trick, I suddenly knew I wanted some other factor to be involved in my show. I decided to come up with an act that touched on ghosts and the supernatural because people love to be scared!"

John devised a brand new seance show, which eventually evolved into a production entitled "Do Spirits Return?" Ferrentino's seance experience focused on a real-life location in Louisville, Kentucky, called The Waverly Hills Sanatorium. The Sanatorium is considered by many to be the most haunted location in America. The show kept progressing, but it still needed a final twist in the format to complete the storyline.

John's daughter Lindsey Ferrentino is an accomplished American contemporary playwright/screenwriter. When Lindsey saw the seance with her fiancé, Ralf Little, a highly regarded British actor, the couple came out of the show impressed, but feeling that it was just

not quite "John." They persuaded him to focus on a new, more organic direction. John's approach became subtly redefined as "I do not believe in ghosts, or the supernatural. However, I visited the Waverly Sanatorium because, in my early years working in a hospital, I had heard amazing stories about Waverly. When I visited, I bought a box of stuff that they were selling in an auction, and I took it home, thinking that it might contain some cool stuff to sell on eBay. Soon after that, a lot of weird stuff has started to happen that I can't explain....." This delicate psychological change in his approach to the seance paid big dividends, and being John, he even managed to add a few dark jokes into the seance setting.

In 2017 John participated in the Battle Of The Magicians Convention in Canton, Ohio, and featured the seance as a special midnight attraction. It was an immediate success, and the magicians attending the convention were intrigued by what they had seen and experienced. Says John, "I had so many people contacting me asking questions, and wanting to learn more about the show that I decided to put together a formal lecture based on the show." In 2019 Ferrentino performed the seance/lecture at the Daytona Magic Convention and the Abbott's Get Together in Colon Michigan to great results. John also created quite a sensation when he presented "Do Spirits Return?" at the IBM Convention in Phoenix, Arizona. Jeff McBride described the seance in this way, "John Ferrentino shines a new light on the dark arts of Seance Theater. He shows us how to update this often Victorian bound entertainment with new and exciting modern presentations that will reach today's audiences. John's experience as a magic designer and prop builder gives us new, ingenious ways to accomplish an extraordinary phenomenon that will leave your audiences breathless." Later in the year, Ferrentino instructed on the art of seance at McBride's celebrated Mystery School in Las Vegas.

I finished our interview by asking John if he had a useful piece of advice to pass onto our readers about developing their magical careers. He replied, "I've always had a very successful career because I stayed one step ahead of what was going on. First, I was performing at Blue and Gold dinners, and then comedy clubs opened up I veered into that. When the comedy club thing started to die down I went into colleges and then when the college bookings started to die down a little bit, I was lucky enough to get some opening act work. When the opening act bookings started to fade out, I started to do corporate shows, and then I was off on another adventure doing cruise ships. I always tried to keep one step ahead of the game." Great advice.

