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The Magazine



Beyond
Belief

Jason Bishop's magic astounds.
His rise above hardship inspires.

APRIL 2018



✦

He makes half-dollars
multiply.

He teleports his assistant.

He levitates more than
10 feet off the stage.

But Jason Bishop's
biggest trick was turning
a nightmare of a
childhood into a dream.

✦

**THE MAGICIAN WHO
WOULDN'T DISAPPEAR**



In a flash of light,

Jason Bishop takes the stage at Allentown's Miller Symphony Hall without ever stepping onto it. Shown on a video screen, walking closer and closer to the audience in the 1,100-seat theater in Pennsylvania, the magician and illusionist suddenly appears in person, standing under strobe lights and spotlights, as if he had sliced a seam from another dimension and stepped into this one. In the audience, mouths drop, and it won't be the last time during this 90-minute show that people will wonder, *How did he do that?*

It's a question people have asked of Bishop his entire life. Whether it was during high school when he made doves appear out of his empty hands, or later when he first showed he could solve a Rubik's Cube with a single snap of his wrist or skip cards off the floor like stones across a river, he has always wanted to amaze people. Later in this show, he sends his fearless assistant and longtime partner, Kim Hess, to levitate more than 10 feet in the air, and then somehow slowly floats to join her.

At a time when the internet robs many tricks of their surprise, Bishop still wows. At 40, he has performed in nearly every U.S. state, played hundreds of cruises, and taken his show to numerous countries, including France and China. He's joked with Al Roker on NBC's *Today* show and filmed an episode for the CW's *Masters of Illusion*. In December, he headlined 39 shows in Times Square.

But the smooth rise of Jason Bishop, while seemingly glamorous, romantic even, may be his greatest illusion yet. In neighborhoods not far from this Allentown theater, he endured a childhood no one should ever have to suffer. Which makes *How did he do that?* even more mystifying.

BEFORE THE SHOW, Bishop is backstage in his dressing room, a few small boxes of his props (balls, coins, cards) lined up on a countertop, a mirror illuminated in fluorescent light stretching the length of one wall. He applies a mysterious substance to a deck of cards,

and then begins to fan them. He likes to keep his hands moving right before a performance, and he always waits until minutes before he goes onstage to dress in his signature Diesel jacket, skinny jeans, and black leather boots. "If I stay busy," he says, "then I never get nervous."

But that this is a hometown show, the first that Bishop's done in the Lehigh Valley in 10 years, means this particular performance in early February is loaded with emotion. Bishop grew up in foster care homes in the area, living in an orphanage in his earliest years. His biological parents, whom he barely knew, were heroin addicts. Less than 20 miles from the theater is where Jason, at the age of 7, went to live with one of his first foster families.

He bounced from family to family, attending the local middle and high school in an Allentown suburb, where classmates knew him as the foster kid. When he turned 18, he left government care.

The memories Bishop has of his early childhood are mostly defined by hunger. At 5 years old, Jason, then Jasane Castro, remembers asking his birth father for food, his stomach empty and grumbling, and the man ordering him to go to bed: a twin mattress on the floor that he shared with his five siblings. He regularly picked through trash for food, and sometimes his birth parents left him in abandoned buildings at night while his birth mother went in search of drugs.

Even now, years later, Bishop will stop himself from overeating, which is his inclination because whenever food was put in front of him as a kid, he'd eat as much as he could. He never knew when the next meal would come.

At some point later, a caseworker arrived, clicking a ballpoint pen—Jason remembers staring at the tip. Soon after, he was placed into state care. Once he left his birth parents, he was fearful at the idea that he might have to go back to them.

"Even though I was a little kid, I had this sense that I had to get out of there," he says. "It may sound harsh, but I wasn't sad to leave them. These people had never acted like my parents. They'd never even taken care of me."

That Christmas, he and his siblings were living in an orphanage, St. Joseph's. From the doorway of his shared room, he watched as an employee pushed a cart full of donated presents down the hall, stopping at each room to hand a gift to each child. Jason was 6, but the sight struck a chord in him, and to this day, he can't tell the story without

his voice wavering. In a past riddled with sadness, it's this memory that rattles him; he can't tell it without crying.

"Just picturing these kids gets me," he says. "They deserved a family, but here they were on Christmas Eve waiting on this sad and lonely present cart. To me, they were better than that."

It's here that you get a glimpse into the unshakable mindset that has come to define Bishop's relationship to his past: *Somehow, rise above it.*

"Jason has always chosen to reject that kind of baggage," says his longtime foster mother, Suzanne Ernst, whom Jason calls "Mom." "At some point, he was able to find a filing cabinet in his mind and close the drawer on the past. He said to himself: 'I'm not going to let this affect my life.'"

Bishop was one of 25 foster children who came to live with Suzanne and her husband, Paul, in their large Victorian in Fleetwood, Pennsylvania, over a few decades. When he arrived at age 8, he had one of the longest honeymoon periods of any child she'd met. He remained on his best behavior for his new foster parents for six months, until one day he got angry about something—"It could have been that he wanted pancakes and I made eggs," Suzanne says—and he began throwing himself against the stained-glass doors in the entryway.

Anger turned to sobbing. So

As a teen, Bishop spent endless hours studying his craft.



she sat with him on the living room floor for more than an hour talking to him, assuring him that she was there to listen. Finally, he admitted why he was upset: He missed the foster mother at his previous placement. It was confusing for a young child to become attached to a loving adult only to be sent to a different family. (The previous foster couple had split up.)

From that moment on, Jason attached himself to Suzanne, and he came to her soon after, and while looking up at her with his sweet, big round eyes, he asked: "Will you be my forever mother?"

SUZANNE, WHO DIDN'T hold back in her love for the foster children she parented (she and Paul also have three biological sons), would often tell kids what they needed to hear to give them a sense of security at their new home. Of course, she'd be his forever mother, she told him, and she meant it. She was beside him through some of the toughest moments of his childhood.

It was at her house that he'd learn that his birth father had been stabbed to death, and his mother was going to prison. Asked about those two events, Bishop says only, "They are very related."

want to see you anymore.

"It was a turning point for Jason," Suzanne says. "Some foster kids hold on to the idea that their parent is going to come back for them, but he severed ties early and it allowed him to move on. He always had this determination within." (His birth mother passed away when he was a teenager. Jason lost track of his biological siblings in the foster care system in subsequent years and has little contact with most of them today, in part because it's emotionally draining.)

Of course, there were still struggles, since for a child, even changing schools can be traumatic. His best friend, Ryan Whitaker, recalls the first month Jason arrived at his school in eighth grade. A popular student announced to a few classmates that he didn't like "the look of that kid," and when one of his cronies took a swing at Jason, the newcomer knocked the bully down with a hard jab to the chest.

"In typical Jason style, though, he put out his hand and helped the kid up," Whitaker says. "You could tell he'd been in some scraps, that he was tough, but he was always such a good kid."

When Jason was 12, the system took him

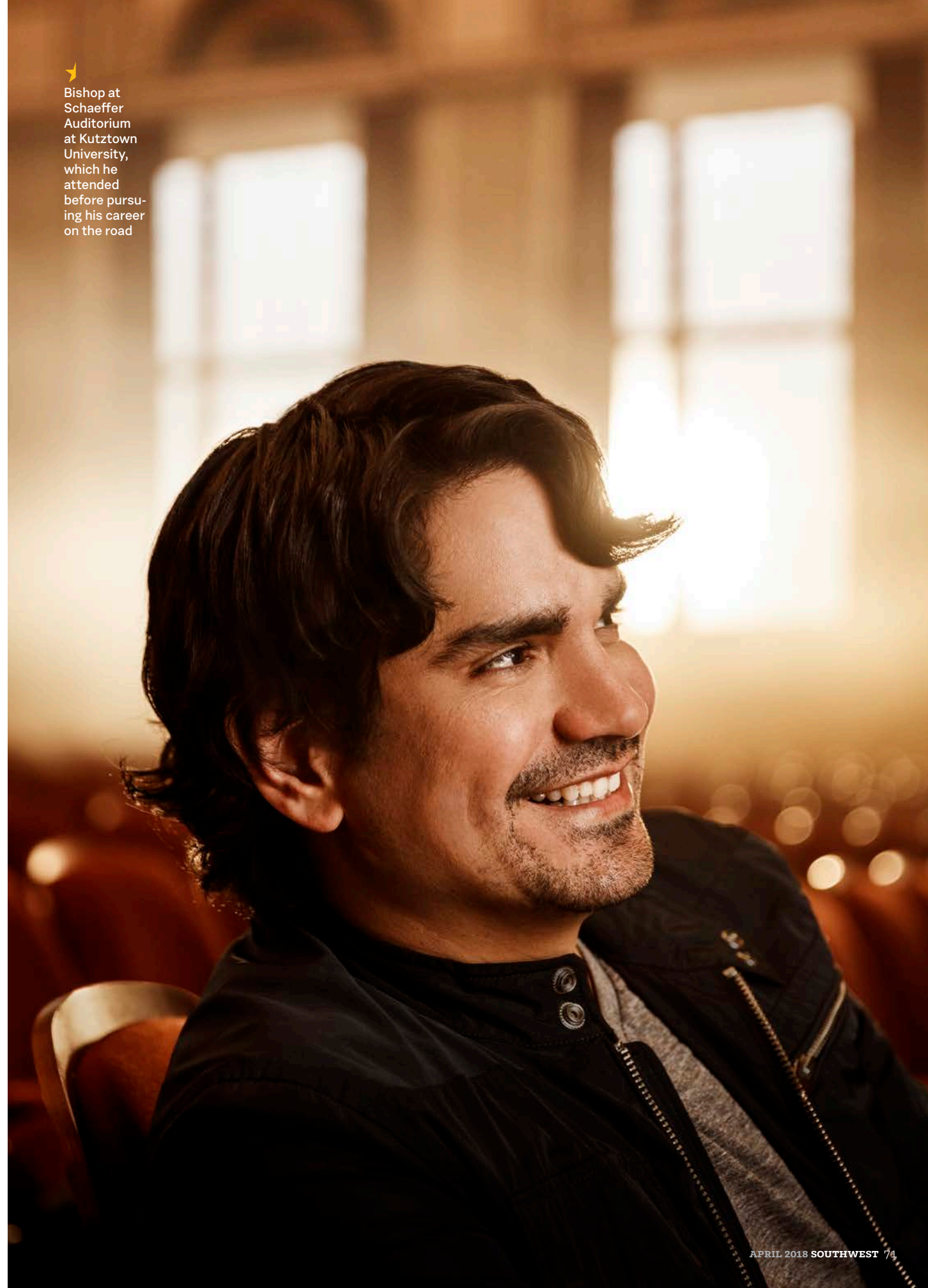
I've always been drawn to stories of self-made men. Magic was filled with these kinds of people.

After Jason attended a few state-mandated visits with his birth mother at the jail, he told Suzanne and his caseworker he wouldn't go back. Jason, then 8 or 9, was so insistent the foster care agency made him a deal: If he'd get on the phone with his birth mother and explain why he didn't want to go, he wouldn't have to return. Suzanne remembers this little boy standing in her kitchen, holding the big receiver to his small ear, standing with authority and speaking so clearly: I don't

away again, not due to anything occurring in the home—he still doesn't entirely understand why, but thinks it was agency politics—and placed him in another foster home. But the day he left, Jason promised Suzanne and Paul that he'd return as soon as he turned 18. Over the next few years, they kept in touch through visits and phone calls.

And true to his promise, on his 18th birthday, Suzanne was washing the dishes in the kitchen sink when she saw Jason enter through the back

Bishop at Schaeffer Auditorium at Kutztown University, which he attended before pursuing his career on the road





Clockwise from center: Bishop with his assistant, Kim Hess, and Gizmo; with Hess and biological brother Aladine "Dino" Vargas (right), at high school graduation; Jason at 6; with Hess and foster mom Suzanne Ernst in Alaska; on Toronto's *Breakfast Television*

PERSONAL PHOTOS COURTESY OF JASON BISHOP

gate and walk the path up to the back door.

"Whenever kids would leave us, my husband would always prepare by distancing himself, but I'd hold on until they were driven away, and then fall apart every time," she says. "But if you go through all of that grieving and then the child comes back to you, then that love is rekindled so quickly."

And there wasn't any question at that moment, as mother and son hugged, tears in Suzanne's eyes, that she loved him like one of her own.

"I knew then," she says, "that Jason would be a part of our lives forever."

DURING THE SHOW, Hess, Bishop's assistant, steps into a rectangular-shaped box and is out of sight. Jason, enjoying the suspense building in the crowd, folds the panels of the box inward, shrinking it to roughly the height and width of four shoeboxes. After turning

the table and showing it to the audience, he pulls two of the silver swords positioned on the back of the prop and pierces through the sides of the box, and then punctures the top with a third sword.

After a dramatic pause, he removes the swords, unfolds the box, glides his hands over the top, and sees Hess pop her head up and then stand with a flourish. The crowd eats it up. Perhaps it's due to his variation of the classic box trick, or maybe it's his dry humor. Either way, he owns the audience.

"Any questions?" No pause. "Cool. Moving on," Bishop says, flashing a boyish grin.

Along with ticket buyers, critics have taken note of his craft. "There's real elegance and even wit in the precision of his gestures, the agility of each finger," wrote one reviewer in *The New York Times*. That mastery is the result of decades of study. When Jason was in high school, he would go to the library (less than 3 miles from the site of this show) and take out whatever books he could

nothing, relying on a mix of pluck, showmanship, and determination to rise to the top.

"I've always been drawn to stories of self-made men," he says. "Magic was filled with these kinds of people. These men had the most amazing lives, and reading about them made me think, *This is possible for me.*"

BISHOP'S DISTINCTIVE BRAND of performance combines the flashy style of magic's theatrical height 30 years ago (think David Copperfield) with the kind of intimate sleight of hand showcased by performers like David Blaine and Ricky Jay. He complements that with a down-to-earth charm, a natural gift honed by hours of practice.

"Jason has a level of honesty as a performer," says Jim Steinmeyer, one of the leading designers of magical illusions and special effects. Steinmeyer was consulted by Copperfield for the magician's trick of making the Statue of Liberty disappear, and he has helped Bishop develop a few of his exclusive tricks. "He does the big, impressive illusions. He does intimate sleight of hand. He's funny and chatty onstage. And in bringing all of these things together, he's made magic feel hip again. People see his show and think, *This guy is really cool.*"

In Bishop's act, he'll walk through jail cell bars in one trick and then seemingly teleport Hess from one large cabinet to another. He follows that by sitting solo for "close-up magic," making decks of cards appear from nowhere, and making half-dollars multiply from four to eight to 12 to 16.

These are serious tricks, but Bishop rarely takes himself seriously. Thanks to his light-hearted conversational style and wit—something he practiced by listening to radio personality and comedian Ron Bennington on long drives to performances—he'll generate as many laughs as

find about great magicians like Harry Houdini, Alexander Herrmann, and Howard Thurston.

"I would see a magic special on TV as a kid, and I'd wonder if I could do that," he says. "When I realized magic was something I could actually learn, I'd stay up reading about it until my eyes were red."

When asked if magic was a form of escape for him, Bishop says there's some truth in that. But at first, he says, the magicians fascinated him more than the magic. Houdini rose from an impoverished background to become one of the most celebrated magicians in history. Thurston, who was said to be more famous than Houdini in the 1920s, ran away from home, penniless, to join the circus before finding magic.

Jason was 15 when he recognized a pattern in these legendary performers: They struggled and had no fancy educations, privileged pedigrees, or family connections. Often, they came from

gasps. “When he’s up there, he’s just being Jason,” says longtime friend Whitaker, who still lives in Allentown. “It’s like you’re hanging out with the same funny guy, only he’s on a stage.”

Hess likens Bishop to the guy at the party who everyone wants to talk to. “He’s not a showoff,” she says. “People are just drawn to him.”

At the Allentown performance, when he calls a 9-year-old boy onstage as a volunteer, the child admits to the magician that he doesn’t believe in magic. Bishop doesn’t miss a beat. “Oh, so you’re a septic. I mean, skeptic. What’s the difference really? They both stink.” Whether or not the audience laughs doesn’t matter because Bishop cracks up at himself, endearing him to the crowd; he even points out a joke if one falls flat: “Hey, I don’t come to your job and judge you, do I?”

After the septic joke, Bishop turns to the boy, telling him to stare at the dollar he brought with him onstage. Bishop folds the borrowed bill down to a small square and then unfolds it back out, only this time it’s a \$100 bill. The boy looks stunned, even more so when the magician tells him to keep it. Bishop, without gloating, without flourish, just smiles.

LONG BEFORE BISHOP began his ascent as a performer, Hess was by his side. They were a pair from the start. There was an attraction, but also an ease; they were best friends months before they went to prom together. That they shared an interest in performing only drew them closer. Hess has won numerous awards as a baton twirler and has a natural stage presence. “He pursued me, which was new for me,” she says, of their senior year. “And I remember that he was very loving, right from the beginning, always making sure I was okay. Even today, he’s like that.”

In the early years of their act, they would work odd jobs and put every penny toward buying magic props—linking rings, vanishing candles, decks of cards. At Christmas, he’d ask his foster parents for thick tomes on magic, some written by Steinmeyer, whom he didn’t know at the time. And in an attempt to land gigs, they would cold-call dozens of venues in the Poconos and Catskills. If 10 people said no, they’d dial another 10.

“In those days, it was like we were in a hole in the ground and we just kept trying to claw our way out, even as the dirt kept coming in on us,” Bishop says. “We had no money, no experience, no

awards, no press. We didn’t have photos. We just had this cockiness and confidence, and it felt like if we could just get the right person, it could change everything.”

When they finally did begin booking shows a couple of years after graduating from high school, they treated each one like a Broadway-level performance regardless of the venue, practicing every twirl, every hand movement, every joke, over and over. On a whiteboard in their workspace, they drew up serious lists of goals, which were always changing.

“As soon as they’d scratch one off, another would appear,” Suzanne recalls. “They both shared the same ambition from the start.” And while Hess wanted the show to succeed, she also wanted Bishop to succeed. From the moment they fell into the same group of friends as teenagers, they were always together, always scheming, planning, dreaming, and supporting each other—all the while falling deeper in love.

“I think Kim always believed in him, and she’d do anything for him—she still would,” says Suzanne, who was always amazed by Bishop’s ability to endure so much rejection as a performer, an anomaly for foster kids who spend a lifetime feeling rejected.

Hess knows a lot about Bishop’s past, of course, but she says he’s still figuring out the many ways it shaped who he is today. “With Jason, I always find it interesting to learn another little tidbit,” she says. “Because sometimes, when you hear it, it makes all the other things stick together.”

In high school, Jason did the bare minimum to get by, Suzanne says, but then he’d spend all his free time practicing a trick for English class where he put a sheet over a classmate at the front of the room and made him vanish. His mom worried that Jason wasn’t thinking about his future in practical terms.

“I wanted his feet on the

A Study in Showmanship

Jason Bishop lives to wow audiences. So what performances and ideas have wowed *him*? Here are four that left an impression.



★ FLURRY OF WINGS LANCE BURTON

WHAT HAPPENS: Doves appear in his bare hands, from a glove, out of a handkerchief, and out of torn paper. **BISHOP SAYS:** “For stage manipulation, I’m not sure anyone was smoother or better paced. Starting in magic, I wanted to be Lance Burton.”



★ DANCING HANDKERCHIEFS DOUG HENNING

WHAT HAPPENS: Handkerchiefs float, dance, and dart impossibly. **BISHOP SAYS:** “It was just fun [and] amazing, and exuded the energy and charm I hope Doug is long remembered for.”



★ NO ORDINARY GUY PENN & TELLER

WHAT HAPPENS: A man from the audience engages with both Penn and an obscured Teller for quite a while. Turns out, the man is Teller. **BISHOP SAYS:** “The brazenness, shock, and creativity of the effect make me feel that, as magicians, we can push ideas further than we first think is possible.”



★ CRAZIEST ENCORE ANDY KAUFMAN

WHAT HAPPENS: This actually isn’t a trick. After a show at Carnegie Hall, Kaufman took his audience in buses to a nearby school for milk and cookies. **BISHOP SAYS:** “It was that rare type of performance that crossed into personal experience. Those are the types of moments I hope to one day have with my audiences.”



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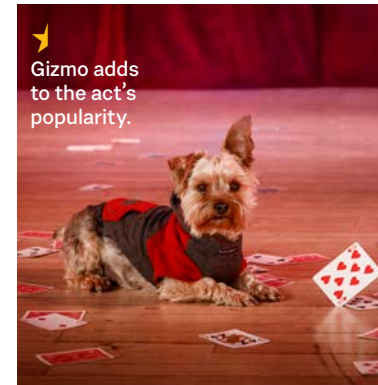
After graduating in 1996, Bishop attended Kutztown University, where he majored in theater, but he left after two years. He and Hess had been cast in a traveling game show, and they planned to take the salary they made from the show and buy larger illusions. Soon after they got back in 1998, they landed their first regular gig at Caesars Brookdale Resort in the Poconos.

THOSE WHO KNOW the couple will tell you they’re doing much of the same thing today that they were doing 20 years ago. Bishop dreams up the tricks, scribbling down designs for prototypes and pulling from a variety of disciplines to execute them—technology, physics, chemistry—while Hess, in addition to the physical demands of her stage work, manages the money, organizes the props, and tracks the performance schedule.

They never married, mostly because they’d rather spend money on props than a wedding, and they don’t have kids—they aren’t sure they could raise them being on the road all the time. But they do have a sweet Yorkie named Gizmo, who is a popular part of the show; the pup vanishes in a metal box and then comes running back onto the stage. (He also gives fist bumps.)

But even with all of the pair’s recent success, Bishop’s ambitions only seem to rise, and he’s yet to find the trick that will make him a household name. While he’s doing several illusions that no other magician is doing onstage today, Bishop wants to push the show to be even more original. He wants each of his acts to feel like pages in a comic book, where his tricks are like moving pictures that freeze at times, leaving the audience with a lasting sense of amazement.

Steinmeyer, who has worked with dozens of magicians over the years, says he enjoys working with Bishop because he’s open to trying anything. “Jason will often say to



Gizmo adds to the act’s popularity.

me, ‘I really want to do different things. Don’t count me out because you think it’s not quite in my style.’ And that’s rare for a performer,” he says. “To start with something brand new and put it on a stage, that’s a big adventure. It involves more time, more money, and it’s scary for some people. But Jason isn’t afraid of that.”

Or, perhaps, Bishop’s already performing the illusion that will make his name as recognizable as Copperfield’s, and he just needs to get the right people to see it. In one sequence of the show, Bishop makes an illuminated ball rise out of a box. With the glowing ball hovering in a fog in mid-air, Bishop sends it up and down, side to side, with an elegant flip of his hands, losing himself in the mesmerizing quality of it, until finally making the ball float in an arc over his head.

Anyone watching the effortless display has no idea, of course, just how many years (21 to be exact) Bishop has spent trying to get the fog and movement and levitation just right. No one will know just how many times the ball failed, how many times Bishop wondered if it would appear as entrancing as he imagined it, how many times he could have given up.

But when it comes to magic, Bishop will tell you, he never gives up.

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