

IT'S A MAGIC-AL WORLD

BY JEFF RICHARDS
PHOTOS BY DAVID SOKOLSKY

Opening night is two days away and Magic Al is nervous. "Don't do this," he insists. Magic Al, a lifelong birthday party magician, is about to star in his own Off-Broadway show.

"Magic Al" Garber has good reason to be nervous. A theater show is a risky endeavor. For more than a year he and his partners have been spending their time and money on a project that may just amount to nothing.

Magic Al has been a leading children's magician on Long Island and throughout the New York area for more than 20 years. He has been the number one birthday party guy on Long Island as long as anyone can remember. But in recent years he has wanted more.

The road to Off-Broadway started when Alan met one of

his partners at a birthday party gig. Peter was a guest who approached Alan to tell him he liked the show. Alan explained his dream to Peter, who later called Alan with some questions. Peter sent his friend, a choreographer, to see Alan's show. Alan remembers Peter telling the choreographer, "Tell me if Magic Al has any chops or not. Or am I wasting my time." The choreographer liked Al so much he wanted to join the team too.

Peter Buppenwieser has written and produced television and radio commercials and is a writer and a marketing consultant. Alan pulled in another partner, Brian Turner, a musician and a film and video editor. They drew up papers and the train pulled out of the station.

Alan's dream was to have his own children's television



show. "When I hooked up with my co-producers I described what I was hoping for. The goal was to get someone in television to look at a video and ask him if would he consider someone like me for a TV show."

They worked to pitch the television show. Unfortunately, according to Alan, "We quickly exhausted our connections." They then decided to try a different approach. "We agreed that if we could not get serious bites we would produce a DVD for kids." So they decided to mount a theater show. This would be performed over a few weeks. The show would give Alan a chance to flesh out his character and the new characters. Then they would videotape this production. This tape would be shown to television executives. If they still didn't have any bites, they would turn the tape into a home DVD and recoup their investment that way.

The team made a decision early on that the production had to be different from Magic Al's birthday party show. "For me that was a big nut to crack. I didn't want to take my birthday show and put it into a theater. But I also knew I couldn't do an illusion show. I didn't have the time or the money. And kids didn't like illusions, anyway." So they wrote a brand new show, with a plot, an arc, songs, sound effects, and a puppet character for Alan to interact with.

Creating The Show

Writing began on the show, followed by rehearsing in each other's living rooms. Alan explained his goal for the script, "I have seen shows that leave me enchanted. And I want the adults to feel that way." The three producers wrote the script and Brian wrote the two songs.

While they were writing and rehearsing, the business side

was getting into gear. The producers approached many theaters to see if they could make a good fit between the production, the size of the theater, and the theater company. They finally chose a prestigious theater that had never had a children's production in it. "We knew we would be getting an upscale following into the theater. This helps the theater get more members too," Alan said.

But once they worked out the numbers they knew the money wasn't going to be there. They had lots of upfront expenses, including building an elaborate set, plus they paid the salaries of the stage staff. "We discovered we had a money losing business. But if we came out of it with good reviews, a good run, and footage for a DVD, it was worth it," Alan said.

A theater show needs more than an actor. So the producers

hired a consultant to then help them hire the rest of the team. The consultant brought them people to interview for all the necessary positions. The team auditioned directors, set designers, lighting designers, puppet builders, and puppeteers. Alan enjoyed the process and felt he was in good hands. "From that we got a great director, set designer, lighting designer, a fabulous puppet builder, and the most incredible puppeteer."

Alan was especially excited about the puppet and the puppeteer. Having a rabbit partner was an idea that he was kicking around for years, and he was named, "Yikes the Rabbit," which comes from the fact that when Alan reacted to an alarming situation in his show, he would say, "Yikes!" So when the rabbit appears in the show, Alan would see the rabbit and react, "Yikes!" The rabbit would respond with, "I'm Yikes the Rabbit at your service."

Alan and Brian designed the rabbit. They got estimates from puppet builders for \$2,500 to \$10,000. Their final rabbit puppet cost \$5,000. When they auditioned puppeteers they saw, "Amateurish to really incredible." There was one day of puppet auditions Alan couldn't attend. During that day they videotaped the auditions. Alan watched the tape and recalls, "I knew immediately this was the one I wanted. Her voice—I just knew." And so they hired Lisa Buckley. Lisa had been a puppeteer on *Sesame Street* and *Elmo's World* as well as assisting the operation of *Alf* at NBC.

The aspect of this project that Alan felt was the most difficult was the adjustment of working with a director. Working with a director means giving up creative control. The director put two major pressures on Alan. The first was what to cut and what to keep. The second was a time limit. As a children's magician, Alan is used to being his own boss and making his own decisions. In this project he had a director who told him what to do. Though Alan was the magician, and had magician's reasons to keep a trick in the show, often the director had other reasons to take them out.

For example, Alan wanted to produce a Harbin Table and use it for an effect. But the director made him take it out. Why? Alan explains, "We couldn't afford a big crew. If I used the table, it had to be moved off the stage. We went back and forth. Finally I gave in because I trust the director." Alan had to align his magical desires with the logistics of theater, "You have to get people to believe in your dream and they have to give up their time and money. Then you give up pieces of the show. It's hard to part with certain magic tricks."

The director, Danny Herman, came well qualified. He directed the *Rugrats Live* tour, and Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, so he knows about theater shows for children. He was insistent that the show run no more than 70 minutes. The director said, "With young kids you can't go over one hour ten. Shoot for one hour or one hour five. That's when they get up. I don't care who you are or how good your show is."

Alan remembers doing a run through and coming out at one hour and 12 minutes, two minutes longer than the maximum time. The director insisted it was too long. But, Alan says, "The show has to introduce and develop the

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“A young man in ICU who had a viral infection causing temporary paralysis was not interested in anything. He was not coping. When Magic Al came into his room, he had him laughing to the point of tears with his magic tricks and humor. The release of laughter was cathartic for this young man. Magic Al helped him to open up to other staff and activities.”

- S. Granville Schneiders Children's Hospital

“For many years Starlight has helped

characters and storyline, volunteers have to come up, and I want time to let funny things happen. It's really hard to do all this in one hour." Furthermore Alan says, "Ticket prices are \$25. I want to give them value for money."

There was one more obstacle for Alan that was especially intense with two days to go—last minute changes in the script. With sound and lighting cues dependent on his performance, Alan had to follow the script word for word. And even with two days left, the script was changing. Lines were being added, cut, and changed. Alan laments, "You work so hard at learning your script and then it gets redone."

I asked Alan what he hopes will come of this project. He said, "I would love a successful DVD and to get a distributor who loves us or a TV producer who says he wants to take us to a show. Also we want to go into bigger theaters. We are open to anything."

And what is your biggest fear right now? I asked. "I hope it makes such a hit and such a buzz, but at the same time I have a fear that it won't. That nothing good will come out of this whole thing. That people will just say 'that was all right.' That all this hard work goes unrewarded."



Performing The Show

Magic Al's show, *It's a Magic-Al World*, was held in the 128-seat venue called the Peter J. Sharp Theater of Playwrights Horizons. It is a new theater on New York's Theater Row, 42nd Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues.

It takes six people to put on the actual show. Magic Al and the puppeteer are the only two people seen by the audience. In addition there is a stagehand, a lighting person, a sound person and a stage manager. (The program lists 13 people who helped create the show.)

As people enter the theater they see a three-dimensional eight-foot tall black top hat on stage. The show begins with Magic Al doing a "Miser's Dream" with two children from the audience. This is done as a warm-up and prelude to the show proper. He finishes his routine with a mouth coil and a dove production from the paper streamer. Then

he steps into a tight spotlight and begins an important speech to the children in the audience.

He explains that he will be telling the audience how he became Magic Al. It is this moment that is very interesting. Children who see Magic Al at birthday parties know they can interact with him, yell stuff out, and he will engage in a dialogue. But the children have come to a theater where there is a "fourth" wall. Most children don't know about the fourth wall, especially when they see their friend Magic Al on stage. So this is when Magic Al explains this to the children. And it works. He says, "Sit back, Put on your seat belts, pay close attention, and listen very carefully." The children fall right in place and become a theater audience.

Alan begins laying out the plot. It turns out that before Magic Al was a magician he was a broker on Wall Street. He gets a phone call one day from his Grandpa Lou who owns a magic shop. Lou is sick and needs Al to mind the store. But Al is a very busy man. Al sings a song about how family is the most important thing you have and decides he has to mind the store.

Alan drives from his Wall Street job to the magic shop.

He does this by holding a steering wheel and driving up to the back of the audience and around and back down to the stage. By the time he returns to the stage the set has magically transformed into the magic shop. This is excellent misdirection, since everyone watches Al and no one sees how the top hat is removed and replaced by a magic shop. Alan told me that many magicians came up to him after the show and told him they missed the transformation of the set.

And the magic shop set is beautiful. It is painted with purples and yellows with flowing Suesian lines and shapes. It has two stations for the rabbit puppet to appear, complete with television monitors for the puppeteer.

When Alan gets to the shop he meets Lou's rabbit "Yikes," who helps Lou run the place. Al opens the mail and discovers that Grandpa Lou is behind on his bank payments and the bank is about to close the store. Alan decides to put on a magic show to raise money to pay the bank. (This becomes the magic that is performed.) Toward the end of the show the bank calls and says they were

in the audience and saw Magic Al perform. I don't think I'm giving away too much when I tell you that the show ends with the bank finally deciding to let the magic shop "stay open forever." Alan says the plot is like, "The Little Magic Shop That Could."

The show is very funny, very professional, and the children really enjoy it. Alan performs: Miser's Dream into a mouth coil into a dove production. "Vanishing Bandana," "Hippity Hop Rabbits," chattering teeth find a card, borrowed watch in nest of boxes, "Super X Suspension," and a Strait Jacket escape. During the show Alan brings up several children and adults to help with the tricks.

Throughout the show the rabbit chimes in with ad-libs and wisecracks to the audience's delight. Magic Al's banter with Yikes the Rabbit is like David Letterman talking to Paul Shaffer. It's quick-witted and warm. Alan also gets to do



some classic two-person bits with the rabbit, including a variation of "rabbit season—duck season" from Bugs Bunny.

I was most impressed with the routine for the "Vanishing Bandana." Instead of a cassette playing the instructions, the rabbit reads the instructions for the trick and Magic AI follows along. This effect was a great choice with a wonderful method of incorporating it into the structure of the show.

Another of my favorite segments is when Magic AI is on the phone with his Grandpa Lou and it turns out Lou is sick. We only hear Alan's side of the conversation. "It's my Grandpa Lou. He thinks he caught the flu. You're coughing up green goo? P.U. Whatya gonna do? I don't have a clue. Boo-hoo for my Grandpa Lou."

It's A Wrap

By the time the show closed Magic AI and company had done 23 performances in two weeks for 2,200 people. Alan had a great time and the theater wants the show back for another run.

How does Alan feel about the show and the experience? "I am really, really excited. I ended up with a better show than I ever expected. I am thrilled with the results."

What were some of the highs and lows? Alan says his favorite show was the one on the last day, after all the video had been shot and the pressure was gone. "Yikes and I went way off the script. We had so much fun. We were really silly."

One of the low points was when Alan, because he had trouble seeing the audience to choose the right assistant, borrowed "a watch the size of a grandfather clock." The watch got stuck going through the watch grinder. Alan had to push it in and through. As if that wasn't bad enough, he then couldn't get it all the way in the trap for the nest of boxes. The watch was falling out the back of the final box

as the spectator confirmed it was his.

Another low point was the time the stagehand didn't reset the levitation before the show. Alan had already brought the child up to lay on the table. Alan had to reset the table with the child right there and the whole audience watching. "It was bad at the time. I didn't know if I could re-set the board and the cloth."

But these kinds of errors are bound to happen in any show. The problem was that Alan had only 23 performances. Had this been an open run, theoretically all the big mistakes would have been made and the show would eventually run error-free.

But that brings up a good point. One of Alan's fears during the run was that the tricks were not reset properly. He is the one on the stage who is expected to be perfect. "A birthday party is so loose. You can re-set anytime you want. But when you are following a script, people are waiting for cues. You don't want any lulls." For the sake of time and Alan's sanity he had others reset the props. Things break each show and need to be addressed. The staff resets the show but they don't understand how important each subtle thing needs to be to be exact. Alan was resigned, "It is a tough call, but sometimes you have to let go of some control for the sake of mental well-being."

It looks as though the show will be running again in December. To find out more check the web site at www.Magic-AI.com.

One week after the last show I asked Alan how he felt about the whole experience. Now his attitude is very different from just three weeks ago. He said, "I am very happy for the experience. I feel it was the best thing I ever did in my show business career." ●