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The Linking Ring

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MATTHEW DISERO

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Celebrating Thirty Years in Showbiz

By David Peck

Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art ... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival.

C.S. Lewis

He stepped into the business at a young age and has wanted to be a full-time professional magician since he was fifteen years old. Matthew Disero is a consummate pro, someone you may never have seen, but he's an act on the circuit that everyone knows. He's walked onto many stages and left with crowds standing on their feet. He's travelled the world, endured and enjoyed hundreds of cruises, worked the North and South Pole and has photos to prove it, travelled with the military to camps in Kuwait, scorched his fingers on palming coins baking in the sun on a Korean carnival stage, and worked so many biker bars that he's comfortable responding to the nickname Easy Rider. He gives, and he takes. He compliments and critiques, and his wedding band is inscribed with Elvish on the inside. He's a husband and father and has a "good pair of mitts," as other magicians will tell you. He loves entertaining people, and his sense of humour is wide, well informed, and often rooted in the moment. His favourite magical effect is bill in cigarette, and he thinks ring on/off wand deserves a second theatrical chance. He also enjoys the coin work of a Gary Kurtz or David Williamson.

Matt loves the risk. That's what makes this road less travelled special. As he recently told me, "Like Papa Wallenda

says, 'Life is on the wire. The rest is waiting.'" His first road gig came with a fair bit of embedded risk. Vegas old-timers might have called him a bit of a high roller who wasn't hedging his bets. At sixteen years old, he took his first road gig on the day he got his driver's license. If he hadn't passed the road exam, he wouldn't have been able to do the show in Sudbury, Ontario, later that night. Gutsy.

Matt has welcomed the serendipitous side of show business. That's how he met comedian Evan Carter, who became a close friend and mentor. It's often like that – mystery and wonder mixed with a little light shining in the darkness. That never hurts. It's sometimes seen as a side hustle, full of entrepreneurship and a bit of healthy, end of the Third Age, Shire fortune on the side. It also helps if you own a Palantír. Be on your guard. Not all of the seeing stones have been accounted for.

Matt is the kind of person who is generous enough to stop along the side of the road and help a stranger change a tire. He's also the kind who is only too quick to tell you the truth when you are flashing the oversized palming coin through the windows of your dubious fingertipped palm. "Sorry there, big guy. Don't think the Kaps or Ramsay subtlety is going to help you right here, right now."



Matthew Disero on Canada's Walk of Fame show. PHOTO BY BARRY RODDEN

Matt loves spinning a good tale, effortlessly quotes from his favourite films, and is gifted in hyperbole. In fact, his hyperbole is often wrapped in hyperbole and then packaged in exaggeration. He's the kind of guy you'd like to hang out with. He's political and relational, and once in awhile, his EQ is eclipsed by his sense of righteous indignation and anger. He's also one of my closest friends. Matthew Disero and I are friends, good friends. We're the kind of friends that understand, look out for, and include one another. We've put in the time, the arguments, and the miles together, and we can often be found laughing about the very same things. Each text and phone call is part of a dialogue we've been having for the past twenty-five years or so. Other than my wife Elizabeth and my cousin Greg (yes, Gregory Peck), I've laughed with no one more than Matt, to the point of joyful, cathartic tears more often than not. I guess you might call it comedic commiseration. Scatological references, quoting lines from our favourite films *ad nauseam*, and sharing an understanding of the absurdity of ourselves and of others allows us a freedom that many don't share – the ability to be transparent, authentic and sometimes a little too honest, on and off stage.

He's also an unapologetic *Doctor Who* fan, and he loves Dr. Suess. Matt builds Lego, collects *Transformers* ephemerae, loves eighties video games, enjoys great film, and is always looking for a heated debate. Some might even call him argumentative. Check him out on social media. You'll find a good dose of nostalgia, friendly commentary, and scathing critiques.

Matt is also a gifted performer. He's the rare hybrid – a truly funny magician. He sells, he travels, and he performs. Let me be clear, Matt is a comedy magician. He wants to make you and his audience laugh. He loves magic, and that will always come through in a performance. But he will never miss the opportunity to remind you that he's not David Copperfield and never aspired to be. He enjoys fooling his audiences, but he loves entertaining them more. He's always had a love and passion for funny movies, people, and magicians. He might even tell you that his on stage personae is just an extension of Chevy Chase's character in *Fletch* with a little *Bueller's Day Off* thrown in to just mix it up a bit. And for the record, his son's name is Ferris. Matt chose comedy and magic, and as he said to me recently when



Top: Matt's performance on Penn & Teller: Fool Us on the CW Network. Bottom: Performing the Homing Card at House of Cards in Nashville, Tennessee. PHOTO BY REBECCA ANNE

discussing why he pursued not one or the other, “It’s like Harry Potter’s wand. It chooses you.” It wasn’t either/or for Matt; it was both/and. He’s too much of a utilitarian not to draw from all his skill sets on stage in his desire to draw people in.

I have respect for his ability to walk into a room and know which way he will take the tone of his show. He reads audiences well and knows when to walk up to a theatrical or comedic line, move it, and sometimes cross over it. Performance art is part delivery and craft combined with emotional intelligence and an ability to entertain. Matt has what it takes to make use of all these elements to deliver a fun, friendly, and engaging show. He’s a stage performer with a whole truckload of playful interaction and solid magical moments to delight and deliver. Matt’s originality comes from his ability to take a classical piece of magic and turn it into a moment of onstage community with large and small crowds. He steps into a room, takes its emotional temperature, and runs with it, most often to very good effect. Oh, sure, I’ve seen him tank a few times, but he’s not one who usually blames the audience. He brings a strange sense of indifference to bear on his performing, yet that is firmly rooted in a sense of professionalism and practicality that leaves little room for an apathetic response of any kind. He’d rarely admit that he cares about his act or the stage that much, but his charm, wit, and desire to work the perfect room gives him away almost every time.

One of Matt’s most prized possessions is an autographed copy of a Paul Daniels’ poster. As a kid, he was hooked and drawn in by magic on television. For me, it was Dale Harney and *The Magic Palace*. For Matt, it is/was *The Paul Daniels Magic Hour*. Matt would thank Paul for the foundation of his magical education. Magic on television was an inspirational source for Matt, as were the face-to-face get-togethers – the magic club meetings and time spent in the local magic stores, Morrissey Magic and The Browsers Den. Matt speaks with a great deal of respect for several

local Torontonians magicians with whom he was privileged to cross paths in his earlier performing days.

“I’m fortunate to have come up in Toronto, a hot bed of magic for a long while. Local talent left a tremendous impression on me. They helped me along the way, even if they didn’t know it. They are some of my favourite magicians: Jeff and Tessa Evason, Glenn Ottaway, Mike Carbone, Wes Zaharuk, David Ben, Michael Ross, and Jay Sankey. All of them taught me valuable elements of working in the business. They were people I aspired to be as good as and one day work with. Without ever sitting down and talking directly about it, I learned from them. I wouldn’t have a career without these people.”

Matt’s comedic influences run wide and deep. He would probably tell you that Chris Rock is the best comedian working today and that Hannah Gadsby has changed stand-up comedy forever. If you haven’t seen her Netflix special, *Nanette*, you should stop reading this article, watch it, and then come back for more on Disero. Matt believes that magicians can and should learn from the cadence and approach that comics bring to the stage and the relationships they create with their audiences. His local influences run wide and deep, too. At the core, local talents are always his favourites: Eric Tunney, Pete Zedlacher, Derek Edwards, Stewart Francis, and Winston Spear. Matt believes you learn by doing, but watching others is a pathway to success of another kind. Taking in a variety of talent, live on stage, is an exercise in what to do and not to do.

Matt’s advice for other magicians is rooted in an eclectic array of experience that has taken him around the world where he’s had the ability to work in the grittiest of conditions and in front of some tough crowds:

Do a million shows, everything you can sink your theatrical teeth into. You will ultimately find your voice.

Save money for those same teeth. Dental work is expensive.



Matthew Disero with four volunteers on stage at the Magic Castle. PHOTO BY TAYLOR WONG

Watch other variety performers: jugglers, comics, and magicians. You can learn a lot from other acts.

Carnivals, cruise ships, children's shows, and military tours have made him a unique performer, but the magic conventions, comedy clubs, corporate crowds, and oil-rigger bars have sharpened his skill set and made him truly accessible and audience friendly.

His advice for young magicians is simple: Sink everything you have into

making a go of it and work as hard as you can until you're twenty-seven years old. If you haven't broken through whatever ceiling you've set as a benchmark, hang up your faux Elder wand. Whatever you do, don't chase the dream until it's too late to get out. Instead, get a "real" job and enjoy the benefits of a pension, paycheque, and a degree of security that will allow you to sleep at night. However, by all means, continue to work and practice magic passionately and intentionally. As Matt will remind you, some of the best contributions in magic have come from part-time acts. There's no shame in that.

Having said that, Matt has never given himself that sort of freedom. He has always wanted to make a living with his act. Period. Full stop. With no side hustles and no day job. Ever. Early on, Matt made that deal with himself, and he has been committed to it for many years. He's not a religious guy, but he is a man of luck, fate, and karma. Like Peter Venkman, he may even believe that everything happens for a reason.

If you do decide to stick it out, as Matt has done, be ready to roll up your sleeves, rack up some serious actual and metaphorical road miles, stock up on mouth coils, and buckle up for a crazy ride. You'll soon



A mid-1990s ad for a comedy club appearance in New York.



The show tour cast in front of one of the military's jet planes in Kuwait. CANADIAN ARMED FORCES PHOTOGRAPHY

be a performer and entrepreneur. You'll need to develop and hone a few very specific market-based abilities and tactics, build your relational skillset, and get ready to triage those entertainment battle scars.

Matt has learned what things to keep inside his toolbox. As Stephen King says in *On Writing* regarding literary tools, the road to hell is paved with adverbs. Matt knows when to use the appropriate gig-based gizmo for the right situation. Lose the adverbs and become a better writer. Lose the repetition and lack of originality and become a better act. The right tools are essential. For example, he has a love/hate relationship with the Internet, but he has learned to use it well. You'll find him on Facebook – active, opinionated, and digitally motivated. He believes in building, maintaining, and developing relationships, and he'll use whatever tools he has access to make meaningful connections with clients, audiences, and other acts. Matt's success is attributed to many things, and his toolbox is varied, deep, and full. Yet, the tools you'll find inside shift from time

to time. The tools don't include VHS tapes, press kits, or eight-by-ten glossy photos anymore. Instead, social media insight, Internet marketing, and a slick website have taken their places. Matt is a bit nostalgic at times and misses the days of having an agent find the right-priced talent for the right setting and client. It seems like that old-school thinking went away a long time ago.

Without a doubt, perspiration and inspiration are linked on a variety of levels, and Matt has spent most of his life working the circuit and doing his professional best to make sense of a crazy and skittish market for his career and his family. Hard work is essential. Being intentional when luck strikes, if it strikes at all, will depend on the time, effort, and passion you've invested along the way. He has known from the beginning that it was going to be a constant relentless hustle. He believes that the pursuit of the performance arts is a tough road to walk. He might even say it's harder than any other job. He's shown he's in it for the duration, and he has a fair bit of



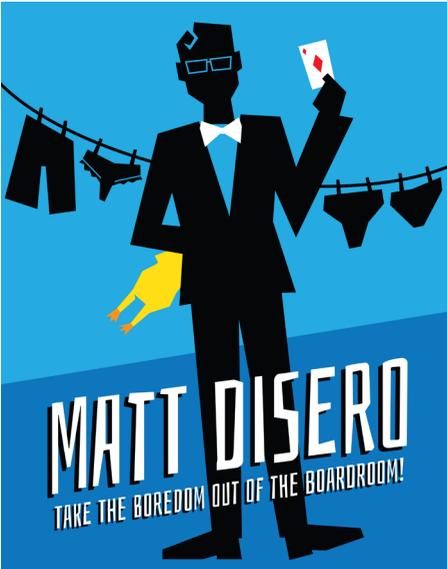
In the cockpit of a Hercules aircraft coming back from the North Pole. CANADIAN ARMED FORCES PHOTOGRAPHY

job security in his future, however spotty it might appear right now. Matt believes wholeheartedly that Muggles will always want to see live entertainment, as long as it's good. He'll tell you that the nature of performance will change, but it'll be there for years to come. "Holograms are now becoming a thing, but they'll never replace the connection of a live act on stage talking to an audience. That relationship is far too unique to be replaced by technology. I think a hundred years from now magicians will still be working – somewhere."

Most of Matt's friends will tell you that Matt is good at building relationships, and as he'd be quick to remind you, "If you don't have any friends in this business, it's going to be a hard, hard road." Saying that relationships are key to running a good business seems like a bit of an understatement, but it's something that rings true in most corporate circles. Matt leans on and is forever indebted to his friends. He still, after all this time, leans on them and will often run ideas and new routines and

approaches by his closest confidantes and friends.

The best piece of advice Matt has, aside from that listed above, is to develop strong, meaningful relationships with people you like, trust, and admire. Invest the time. Go the extra mile. Err on the side of generosity with other people and acts. He argues that pretty much every one of his best gigs, corporate events, and European tours has come through his friends. He'd include the Magic Castle, *Penn & Teller: Fool Us*, cruise ships, and theatrical tours in that list. No joke. Important deals and dealings are brokered in and through friendships. Relationships matter. Matt tries to pay it forward whenever he can. The good fortune that he feels as a result of the impact his friends have had on him is incredibly important to him. He would never have made it in the business without them. That's high praise, but it's also genuine and wise, and ultimately, it's good guidance for others. Invest in people.



“The beauty of showbiz is that you just never know,” says Disero. August 2020 will mark thirty years of full-time work in the business for Matt. Comedian and author Wing, who has appeared on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*, competed on *America’s Got Talent*, and appeared at the *Just for Laughs* comedy festival nine times, has this to say about Matt and his blend of talent and tenacity, “In the comedy performance business,

A Holland America cruise ship theater.

you need two of three attributes to make a living. The three attributes are performance ability, writing ability, and business ability. I’ve only met two people in my life who have all three, and Matt is one of them.” I’d like to know who the other one is!

Making a living in the performance arts is tough. It’s rewarding but also infuriating at times. It’s full of risks and has more ups and downs than a top-notch job in the housekeeping or food-services industry. Sadly, Matt has quit better jobs than the one he currently has, but those were always his choices. He’s stuck to it and committed in a significant, intentional way. He’s worked the clubs, the routines, and the relationships. Herb Morrissey, a dear friend of mine and owner and founder of Morrissey Magic, once signed an old eight-by-ten promo photo for me by saying, “Success is work.” If you don’t really love this business, it’s best not to come at it full time, as Matt would tell you. “It swallows up everything you have.” He’s proven that Herb was right, that relationships matter, and that stickiness is a quality he has in hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades.