

BY GABE FAJURI

Hailing from Victoria, British Columbia, she was born in 1971 to professional magicians Tony and Ann Eng who, even as twenty-something parents, knew that their show would benefit from the built-in applause cue in the production of a three-month-old baby girl.

“They didn’t waste any time putting me into the act,” Julie said. Though she was in the family business from before she can remember, before she could even walk or talk, Eng is assured that her parents were always supportive and sincere in their wishes for her future success no matter what path she chose; they gave her the choice to make her own life in her own way.

“I was privileged growing up in and around magic,” she says. “I used to joke that it was both a curse and a blessing. It was weird having the only dad with a straitjacket at home — try explaining *that* away. But my parents never made our show-business life strange. It was just life.”

But not all of her show-biz experience was magic-related. Julie’s parents encouraged her involvement in more conventional art forms, too. She spent fourteen years

studying ballet and became an accomplished rhythmic gymnast, too. Perhaps that’s why, by the age of twelve, she was regularly performing the usual string of birthday party gigs in and around her hometown; she was at home onstage, be it in a dance recital or with a trunk full of magic props at her side.

In her teenage years, after logging many a mile in Victoria and its vicinity by performing magic shows for private functions, her repertoire expanded significantly to include dove work, close-up, and stage routines. She entered and won several magic contests, including placing second in the stage competition at the Micky Hades Magical Weekend Conference in Vancouver in 1986, and took

Julie Eng

Onstage, Offstage, and Backstage

A quick canvass of Julie Eng’s past reveals more than the typical “I got a magic set for Christmas” story. In some ways, she had no choice as far as her career is concerned.



first prize in close-up at the 1991 Regional IBM Convention, also held in Vancouver.

But magic and performing never overtook scholarly pursuits and accomplishments. Eng's grade-school years were studied with achievements, from the honor roll to a student council presidency. And when it came time to leave the nest for the first time, there was no question that college would be the next step. Her family encouraged her — no matter how strong her family ties to performing were — to continue to achieve academically.

Studying commerce at the University of Victoria was the next step. And because she'd taken to the family business long before that, her college career was supported and spurred on by her performing. Birthday parties begat private parties, which developed into the occasional corporate date. Commerce and magic can make fine companions — a concept Julie was already familiar with, having been raised by parents who owned and operated a magic shop. Julie's commerce degree helped to further solidify her sense of the relationship between *show* and *business*.

Tony's Trick & Joke Shop had come into existence in 1986, while Julie was still a high-school student. Nevertheless, she dove right into the family business. According to Julie, "Things got crazy busy." That's because she wasn't just hanging around the shop; she was working side-by-side with her folks, demoing and selling magic, and later developing the company's website. This was back when e-tailing magic was only a twinkle in most merchandisers' eyes. Maybe that's why the shop's domain name was so well-chosen: *www.magictrick.com*. (Since 2005, the business has been owned and operated by magician Murray Hatfield.)

Despite her willingness and aptitude for meeting the challenges of the retail business, selling magic across the counter had never been Julie's dream. For that matter, it wasn't her parents' primary focus at all times. Gigs were the thing. "Sometimes, my dad did gigs to support the shop," she said. The shop was, for many years, a second income for the family. In fact, even after Julie and her sister Sandra had long since graduated from college, and the shop was a going concern attracting legions of tourists on a weekly basis, the family kept performing.

Julie worked solo, in virtually every available venue: Butchart Gardens national historic site booked her for two consecutive holiday seasons; she was a regular at Vancouver's popular Japanese Village restaurant; and even cruise ships came calling for two seasons. The lessons learned from the family business stood her in good stead.

Fast-forward to 1997, when Julie took a weekend vacation to Toronto. In addition to



Julie and her father at Tony's Trick & Joke Shop in 2005. Performing with sister Sandra [right] at the 1987 Lantern Festival in Victoria. With her parents, Ann and Tony, in 2007, on Tony's 61st birthday. Performing her father's Checker Cabinet routine at the 2006 PCAM in Victoria.

seeing the sights and visiting friends, she scheduled an interview with David Ben, who was remounting his production of *The Conjuror* and had advertised for onstage and backstage help. "The sum total of my interview was, 'Have you ever done the Asrah before?' I told him I'd *seen* it done before. That, and an apparently coincidental meeting with Patrick Watson, coauthor of Ben's show, who sized me up to see if I could work on the show, got me the job." Watson wasn't looking her over to see if she would fit into a wedge base; as Ben's closest confidant, he "accidentally" ran into her as she left the interview and gave her an on-the-spot, informal grilling of his own. She passed with flying colors and was offered the job.

When Julie called her parents to talk about the potential gig, which would require moving across the country for three months, her father immediately encouraged her to take the plunge.

It was an engagement that would change the direction of Julie's life. Thirteen years later, she still has both feet firmly planted in Toronto. As it turned out, her work with David Ben did much more than provide her with a postgraduate course in theatrical production and magic. Suleman Fattah, Ben's principal assistant, met Julie at Toronto's Pearson International Airport when she arrived in town. "Three hundred and fifty-eight days later, we were married," Julie said. "Now, when people ask how we met, Suley tells them he 'picked me up' at the airport!"

Julie's time with *The Conjuror* put her in contact with a range of magicians and producers she'd never encountered back in Victoria. As David Ben came to realize her immense professional abilities, her work for him increased. When *The Conjuror* toured Ontario in 1998, Julie became the company manager. "Surrounding myself with real pros

from the theater world gave me an entirely new skill set,” she said.

Working with stagehands, lighting technicians, house managers, and show promoters, Julie developed a better feel of what it takes to run a *show*, in the larger sense of the word, not just a magic show. She began to look at the big picture of producing, organizing, and running a theatrical experience. Yes, it was important that she knew how to light the stage for an Asrah Levitation. But it was equally important that she know how to navigate the pitfalls associated with corporate sponsors and the intricacies of scheduling a month-long tour of the province of Ontario.

But one month does not make a career. And at the time, Eng’s work for David Ben was not a fulltime occupation, so she also began working private engagements around Toronto. In that arena, she was instantly different from the competition. “Being a woman in this field has been an asset. I’m unique immediately. And because I’m Chinese, that adds another element of mystery and uniqueness,” Julie confided. “But people get over the fact that I’m female almost immediately. The comment is generally that I’m a magician, not a woman,” she added with pride.

Her repertoire plays to her strengths as a woman and a thoughtful magician. And some of the material in her stand-up show comes directly from the family playbook. Her Linking Rings routine is word-for-word her father’s and she also performs his version of the Okito Checker Cabinet with a few of her own touches.

All of that stage training and experience served her well when she went back to British Columbia and began three tours of the Western Canadian provinces with her parents. From 1999 to 2001, Julie managed

the family’s *Mysteries of the Orient* illusion show. She coordinated many aspects of the production, from onstage work to the financial nitty-gritty.

Today, Julie’s performing work is more often in the area of close-up magic, entertaining at corporate events and hospitality suites, which she maintains are still prevalent in Canada. A typical set includes classics such as a razor-sharp version of Vernon’s Three Card Monte, a Cigarette Paper Tear, Coins Through the Table, and The Expansion of Texture. As to her current performing style, Eng has blended the training she received from David Ben with the magic she was brought up on.

But aside from the time spent performing onstage and coordinating backstage, it’s clear that Julie’s focus these days is on being a *promoter* of magic in all its forms. For the past two years, she has served as Executive Director of Magicana, a not-for-profit organization that focuses its efforts on exploring magic as a performing art. Eng started working with the organization at its inception in 2005, as director of two of its outreach programs. The first, My Magic Hands, brings magic lessons to underprivileged children in Toronto. In the past five years, the eight-week course has actively engaged over 500 children, using magic to teach them valuable life skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and self-confidence. Since Eng created the program, the kids who’ve participated have performed for over 3,000 community members.

The other program Julie developed for Magicana — it brings a smile to her face when she talks about it — is Senior Sorcery. “We partner with local theater groups and do shows for senior centers that don’t have access to outside theater or entertainment for various reasons.” Unlike other outreach

programs for seniors, Senior Sorcery engages them by creating interactive performances and encouraging isolated seniors to invite their families and friends to a special event. “That’s a big shift for our theatrical partners,” Eng said. The performing arts organizations didn’t typically program interactive performances for seniors. “Breaking down that fourth wall is a wonderful thing.”

But Julie’s work doesn’t stop there. As a tribute to her father, who succumbed to cancer in 2008, she helped to establish a youth fund in his name, administered by Magicana. The fund is aimed at supporting worthy youths, ages thirteen to eighteen, with a serious interest in the art of magic. This June, the organization participated in Toronto’s city-wide arts festival, Luminato [see story page 54], which included explorations of magic as a performing art. It was a perfect fit with Magicana’s aims.

Julie also coordinated the annual 31 Faces North event in Toronto, and the Magic Collectors’ Association’s annual conference in Chicago. And yet, somehow, she still finds time to tread the boards. “I don’t have to rely on performing as my main source of income any longer. I get to choose the shows I want to do these days.” This includes both the Senior Sorcery and My Magic Hands participants. She finds working for those audiences “supremely gratifying.”

“When I was a kid, I didn’t like being singled out for having such an unusual and well-known family. But now, a few decades later, I thank them every day for encouraging me to embrace my individualism and to be proud of who I am and where I’ve come from. I suppose what keeps me going is that I get to work — and play — with magic every day. I can’t think of a better gig.” ■



Julie makes sure a trick works for a young rehab patient earlier this year, and shares a moment with a Senior Sorcery participant in 2008.