



TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE OPPORTUNITY

By Jaq Greenspon

“I’m kind of an adrenaline junkie,” says Doug McKenzie about an hour or so into our conversation. His latest obsession is skydiving and he has just purchased his first parachute rig, which he displays proudly. “It’s a little cold for jumping now, so I’m prowling the forums and skydiving sites.” The more I talk with him, the more it becomes apparent that obsession is a standard gear for this transplanted New Yorker. “I like to know the minute details about things,” he says with a disarming grin.

Knowing the minute details about things, fair to say, has served him well over the past ten years or so, as he’s gone from business school graduate to a sought-after close-up entertainer and magic consultant. He hobnobs with celebrities, counts racecar drivers amongst his closest friends, and has been dating a model for about a year (she says a year, he says longer). He also speaks three languages fluently, collects art, and can fix his own motorcycle. Not bad for a kid from Scotland who didn’t really discover magic until he was fifteen and didn’t start performing



Doug McKenzie amazes Christie Brinkley in 2007 and positions a camera on a consulting gig.

performer. The two became friendly and would casually hang out, going to nightclubs and bars together. “There’s huge lines of people trying to get in and he’d do a card trick,” McKenzie remembers. “All of a sudden we were ushered inside, given free drink tickets, and treated like VIPs. For an eighteen-year-old, this was like, ‘Wow!’ It’s really amazing what magic can do.” Suddenly, what had been a private hobby became a public skill. Doug McKenzie, Magician, was born.

Actually, McKenzie was originally born in 1980 in Stirling, a small Scottish town,



for other people until three years after that.

At eighteen, McKenzie left his boarding school in Princeton, New Jersey, for the Stern School of Business at NYU. Wandering around the streets of New York, he met a fellow NYU student while watching a street

but the family quickly moved to Oman in the Middle East, where young Doug had his first experience with a full-fledged magic show. P.C. Sorcar Jr. toured the area in 1985, bringing with him a large stage show. Meeting the performer afterward made more of an



*McKenzie performs in Giza, Egypt in 2002.
[Right] Five-year-old Doug meets P.C. Sorcar Jr.*

impression than the show itself for the five-year-old McKenzie. To this day, he has tried, with no luck, to get in touch and thank him for the experience. Even seeing the amazing things onstage, like a jug of water that never leaves the stage and never seems to be empty, McKenzie still didn't grasp the concept of what magic was or what it could do.

In 1989, another move brought the McKenzie clan to Germany and a little town about an hour south of Munich, described by Doug as a "place for old people." Making the best of a bad situation, Doug went to an international school to start with, but eventually learned German and attended a local Gymnasium — just in time to move back to the Middle East, this time Saudi Arabia, in 1992. Again, he attended a British school and learned classic Lebanese Arabic during his lessons there. At the same time, though, his parents had decided that instead of living in a compound designed for Westerners, they would live in a local Saudi neighborhood, exposing Doug and his older sister, Lesley, to the local cultures. The Western influence was



so prominent that the benefits — nicer house, more privacy — outweighed whatever little danger might be present. It was here Doug picked up street Arabic, the stuff they don't teach you in a textbook, and a more direct cultural sense of what the Saudi lifestyle was all about. These would serve him well later on.

In 2002, things changed for the better. Doug had graduated from university and was out looking for a job in finance. There was only one problem: while his classmates had spent their time in school getting internships and fostering business relationships, Doug was spending evenings doing magic and making friends and meeting people. One of the people he met was Lorraine Kirke, a New York socialite who hired Doug as a personal assistant. "She threw these extravagant



Angelo Carbone and Doug consulting with Dynamo in Bradford, England, 2005.

The “Marco” he’s referring to is Marco Tempest, and the work was on Tempest’s groundbreaking TV show, *The Virtual Magician*.

Christmas parties every year. And the first party I ever walked into, the first group of people I met were all celebrities,” he says with an almost boyish glee. “This was amazing. I got to hang out and do magic for all these people.” Through her, Doug met a lot of interesting people, characters he could tell his parents all about.

So when graduation rolled around, Doug was on the path to a high finance career and was even offered a job by an executive at Bear Stearns, mostly because he knew that Doug knew a lot of wealthy people. But that’s not how McKenzie operates. He wouldn’t exploit his friends in that way. He figured the magic was a good stopgap measure, something to do until he found a job in finance. Then he stopped looking for a job in finance. “I think Marco was a big part of that. I had the opportunity to work with him and I made good money, so I didn’t have to worry about paying the bills.”

The two met when McKenzie ran into Tempest at a magic show. They struck up a conversation in German, chatting about their mutual love of technology and gadgets. Before long, Tempest offered McKenzie a gig. “It was fun,” explains McKenzie. “I didn’t know very much about TV magic and TV production.” What he did have was an innate understanding of magic and a desire to go to Las Vegas, where the first episode was being filmed.

Things worked out. McKenzie was brought on board, along with people like Jamy Ian Swiss, who wrote the shows, and Johnny Thompson, the magic consultant. By the time the second season began production, McKenzie was promoted from magic wrangler, the guy who would get the props and figure out what to do with them, up to magic producer. “I’d write the voice-overs. I’d help find the talent that was going to perform, the guests. I’d help orchestrate the magic.”





Doug performing at the Harvard Club in New York, 2009. Asi Wind, Johnny Thompson, and Doug developing a piece for David Blaine, 2011.

Another skill he picked up along the way was pickpocketing. For TV work, McKenzie found this ability particularly handy. “A lot of times, you have to find out information about somebody or load something into somebody’s pocket,” he grins. “I’m pretty resourceful at that.” McKenzie says it’s especially gratifying to grab someone’s watch or wallet or cell phone when filming in New York, because “they think they’re so street smart here.”

McKenzie traveled the world with Tempest, working with him on TV appearances and shows in places as far flung as Japan, Egypt, Brazil, Switzerland, and Germany. More importantly, he was learning about TV production and coming into his own as a magician. They say luck favors the prepared, and Doug was doing his best to make sure when fortune came knocking, he’d be ready.

He’d already had one run-in with the famously fickle lady luck in 2001, when he and several other young magicians were



approached to help David Copperfield create an effect for his special that year. The work, ultimately, was never used on air, “but it was a few months of fun and hanging out with Copperfield.”



And luck was about to come knocking again. In 2005, while hanging out in New York, now his permanent home, McKenzie was with a friend, about to leave a party at the same time David Blaine was walking in. It turned out that the friend knew Blaine. Introductions were made, invitations were proffered. An hour later, McKenzie found himself in a nightclub, sitting with Blaine and talking shop. When Blaine asked to see something, Doug was ready.

McKenzie decided to do a piece he and Tempest had created, which had been reworked into a close-up routine. Technology was only one of the common interests between McKenzie and Tempest, but it was something not a lot of other close-up performers were fully utilizing at that point. “It was a coin that vanishes and appears inside a cell phone, and then the cell phone would X-ray your hand and you could see the coin in your hand.” In fact, they had come up with several routines using the coin and the cell phone, all based around adding photographs and Flash programming to some of the earliest cell phones with those capabilities. In addition to the coin appearing in an X-ray of the volunteer’s hand, there was also a version in which the virtual coin would pop off the screen as the magician performed a muscle pass.

It was the latter effect that McKenzie did for Blaine at the nightclub. Blaine’s immediate response was, “We should hang out.” They soon realized that they had some mutual friends, as well a number of common interests, including motorcycles. It wasn’t long before the pair became good friends themselves, getting together and trying to fool each other with magic. “The next thing I showed him was a card trick called Color Sense, by Pit Hartling,”

says McKenzie. “It was a really great trick and something I’d been working on. I fooled him, and he likes being fooled, as any magician does.” A year later, Blaine asked McKenzie to help produce his *Drowned Alive* special.

For McKenzie, this is a natural progression. His life and work are based on personal relationships, combined with knowledge and skill. Growing up mostly in the Middle East taught him the benefits of knowing the right people. “Everything there is done with favors. You want to get your driver’s license, you have to know the guy. I went to get my license before I was of legal age. If you know the guy, he’ll hook you up.” So it made sense that when the time came for Blaine to do his next couple of specials, he would ask his friend for help.

Since then, McKenzie has been all over the dial. He’s been in Japan, working with Cyril. He’s been in the UK, working with Dynamo. Often he gets calls for specific effects or to offer a completely different point of view. Magically, he’s a close-up guy with a technological bent and an eye for outside-the-box thinking, so he fits a specific profile. For example, Cyril was recently doing a show sponsored by Sony Eriksson, and they asked him to design an interactive effect that the audience could do at home with a cell phone. Cyril called McKenzie. A week later, McKenzie had the effect worked out. Sometimes he’ll be there at the inception, going with the location scouts to make the magic seem organic to the place. “We’ll see a bunch of trash and think, *What can we do with a bunch of trash that promotes recycling?*” Whether the effect is location-based, prop-based, or concept-based, McKenzie is able to bring his own sensibilities into play. “For TV, you need to have something that’s very easily understood and it has to be very visual. I think



“You still have to hit them out of their core. You still have to make them believe.”



mentalism is very difficult to do on TV because just telling somebody what they're thinking only goes so far. You need to have something visual to appeal to more than one sense.”

What McKenzie also brings to the table is the philosophy that “you still want to be able to manipulate people’s memories of what happened.” Regardless of the fact that you can always edit if you need to, for McKenzie

the effect doesn’t work unless you can affect them live. “You still have to hit them out of their core. You still have to make them believe.” This holds true with his own performances, as well. Primarily a card guy, McKenzie focuses on memdecks, specifically the Tamariz stack. He’s done a lot of work with that stack. “If I have a spectator who lies and says his card was the Two of

Spades instead of the Four of Clubs, I love that moment. Because even though all his friends know he's lying, for me it becomes the opportunity to make magic happen at a moment's notice." Knowing the stack allows McKenzie the opportunity to improvise, to make each performance an individual experience. "That's what makes magic interesting for me when I perform — playing around with situations and people. Taking advantage of opportunities that present themselves."

Recently, McKenzie had that opportunity when he found himself in front of Teller, about to perform a card trick. Teller named a card. Almost immediately, McKenzie spread the deck to reveal that the card was no longer in the deck. Instead, it was inside the card box that had been in front of Teller the entire time. Evidently, the effect impressed Teller, who tweeted: "It's rare to see good magic, Doug McKenzie fried me with great magic last night."

For Doug, if his deck isn't in stack, he doesn't feel right. He's been obsessing about it for a while now, even joking that if he were to give a lecture, the only people who would really appreciate it are those who use the Tamariz stack. He'll adapt other tricks into his stack work, just to see if he can refine them. Currently he's fiddling with a piece that dates back to Erdnase, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind*, in which a glimpsed card shows up on the top or bottom of the deck, or is found reversed in the middle. The way McKenzie does it involves having *two* people look at cards, and he can instantly identify both cards. He does it using properties of the stack itself, adapted to this effect.

Along those same lines, at least in terms of presentation, he's created an effect that is simple but takes a Rube Goldbergian effort

to make it work seamlessly. It involves having a photograph transferred to a dollar bill, making a spectator's face appear in place of Washington's. Even more impressive, the face is spot-on because the photo has been taken at that party. McKenzie boasts he's got the process down to ten minutes and it all operates out of a case he carries with him to gigs, a case that includes a computer and a small printer. Obviously, he doesn't do this effect for every house party he works, but when he does, it certainly makes the magical moment personal and real.

He's also part of the Hocus Pocus Project, founded by writer and magician Bill Kalush as part of the Conjuring Arts Research Center. For two years, every Monday night and Tuesday, Doug visited four different facilities, teaching and showing magic to the residents. These ranged from a juvenile detention facility to a veterans' hospital to the kids ward at the NYU Hospital. For McKenzie, these visits are a very rewarding experience. For the vets, it was all about teaching them effects to help with their coordination and memory, while for the kids, it was a chance for them to get out of their rooms, socialize, and learn something to impress their friends and parents. For the inmates at the detention center, it was about creating respect — not only for themselves, but for Doug, as well.

These days, Doug McKenzie divides his time between the consulting work and his own performances, slipping in a few parachute jumps and long rides on his motorcycle as time allows. And he never stops creating. He's always thinking of ways to go to the next level, to take advantage of the many opportunities with which he's presented. **M**