

Up Close: Roland Sarlot & Susan Eyed Carnival of Illusion

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Alliance for Audience UpWords interviews leaders of marketing, communications & audience development efforts throughout Arizona's arts & cultural community.



Roland Sarlot & Susan Eyed

- **What exactly is the “[Carnival of Illusion](#)”?** Carnival of Illusion is Arizona's only regular running illusion show. It's special because we based it on Vaudeville magic and the late 1800 parlour experience. We designed a magical evening to appeal to adults for a fun date night out, to celebrate a special event, and for tourists looking for something that they'll only find in Arizona. We like to tell people that we take them on a magical journey around the world since the theme is about our travel experiences. Since there are only 35 seats, everyone is very close and it's extremely fun not just for the audience but for us as well!
- **When did you start performing together and how did you come to establish roots in Tucson?** Susan moved to Tucson to escape the cold and dreary Midwestern gray skies and Roland designed astronomical instruments for the world's largest telescopes at the University of Arizona. She came for the sun, he came for the stars, obviously it was a match made in heaven. At the time, Susan was touring with her dance troupe and teaching bellydance workshops at Miraval Resort, and Roland was also working at Miraval performing the roots of our parlour show today. We began helping each other with our respective performances and decided to collaborate. Our first performance together was seven years ago and this January 2011 we had a weekend fundraiser celebrating our 1,000th performance together.
- **Why do you perform in a hotel rather than in a theatre?** We want to give our guests the experience of attending a unique show in an intimate setting decorated with artifacts that we've collected from our world travels. (Transforming a boardroom into an old-world parlour with

keepsakes and oriental rugs every week is magic in itself!) By not being on a stage we are able to keep close proximity to our guests which we feel creates a strong bond and personal relationship. It actually feels like we are entertaining friends in our home. A hotel setting also allows guests to bring beverages from the bar and the opportunity to dine there before or after the show. In addition, the hotel provides our guests the option of creating a magical weekend getaway, all under one roof. Every weekend, over one fourth of our audience drives to Tucson from the greater Phoenix area just to see our show.

- **How are audiences in Tucson distinct from audiences you entertain elsewhere around the country?** In Tucson, we appeal to a wide range of audiences including locals, tourists, snowbirds and corporate clients which are pretty much the same diverse audiences we perform for on tour across the country. We have worked for Fortune 500 CEOs, on 70 foot rock-star casino stages, as well as veteran's hospitals, county fairs and festivals in the blowing dust-storms and rain, to up-scale resorts for the "200 Most Powerful Women" in the country. Truly, after 1,000 shows now under our belt, we have performed for countless different audiences but they all seem to have a few things in common: They want to be entertained, they want to be respected, and they want to be moved.
- **Do you think of yourselves more as performers or entrepreneurs?** What's the difference? We think of ourselves as performers but we have to be entrepreneurs in order to perform. If we had a choice we wouldn't do any business, but we promised ourselves when we began that we wouldn't be starving artists. Perhaps we are business people with an artist's heart or dreamers who don't just dream but give 120% everyday. This is the hardest thing we've ever done, but it's the most rewarding.
- **What does "audience development" mean to you?** In our opinion, "audience development" means doing the very best show, every show, and building a loyal guest one at a time. The numbers of our return guests and referrals are staggering. Here's our secret: We offer our guests a wonderful experience and continually give them more than they expect, not just the night of the show, but every moment we interact with them. We start with the quality of our advertisements, to accommodating their personal telephone inquiries, welcoming them during check in and pre-show, treating the audience and each other with respect during the performance, and end by personally thanking them after the show. Customer service is EVERYTHING!
- **How is the art of magic and the art of running a business most similar?** They're both illusions!!! Also, they both look effortless on the outside, but underneath there are incredible layers of hard, HARD work.
- **If you had an extra \$10,000 which you HAD to spend on advertising immediately, how/where would you spend it?** We'd increase our team to plaster the town and the web with non-traditional advertising and guerrilla marketing techniques. With the remaining money, we'd take the day off, get a massage, go out to dinner, get a good night's sleep and not answer a phone, or look at a computer for 24 hours in order to prepare for the barrage of calls.
- **If another Arizona performing arts organization asked you for marketing advice, what is (are) the most important lesson(s) you would want to share?** First, treat your guests with the utmost respect and give them more than they expect. You see, people rarely believe in traditional ads anymore but they do believe their friends. Second, try to develop complimentary partnerships to create a package that's bigger than the parts. Finally, track every dollar you spend on marketing and analyze the return. If you don't track it, you don't know if it's working; keep what works and dump the rest. (We do that in our show as well.)

- **How would you describe what you hope the Carnival of Illusion will grow into in, say, 5 years?** Our goal is to create a second magical theater experience at a top Scottsdale resort with an evening that's so memorable and personal, guests return to celebrate special events in their lives. Our vision is to be known around the country as a "must experience" attraction for visitors to Arizona (with a waiting list of four weeks!) For ourselves, we hope to continue this magical journey with each other in beautiful (and sunny blue skies) Arizona.