

Sarlot and Eyed: Blood, Sweat, and Butterflies

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At a busy resort, on a starlit night in Tucson, Arizona, you purchase an ornate, black-and-gold ticket to see a magical experience. You are then escorted into an ante-chamber where funky striped curtains and music draw you into the entrance of an intimate theater. As you pass through the entrance, you are transported to a different world. The room is decorated with trappings from the Jules Verne novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*: plush curtains, colored lights, antique pieces of history that span the globe, and thirty-five comfy chairs. You have just entered Sarlot and Eyed's Carnival of Illusion.

Carnival of Illusion takes you on a journey around the world. You will explore fascinating places like France, India, and Japan. There is exotic music, magic, dance, razor blades, and swords. There is even a cute little dog named Harriette Houdini that makes an appearance, much to the delight of the audience. The finale of the show is a piece that Roland and Susan have been performing since 2003, called "The Gift." It ends in a storm of beautiful butterflies that cover the audience.

Roland Sarlot and Susan Eyed perform this intimate parlor show in their secret world four times every weekend. They have been on television, radio, newspapers, and magazines all across the Southwest. Carnival of Illusion has received high praise from critics and the regional media. Many have congratulated the couple on becoming an "overnight success." To this statement Roland chuckles and replies, "It has taken a few years of blood, sweat, and butterflies to become an overnight success."

Blood, sweat, and butterflies? Okay, I get the blood and sweat part, but what's this butterfly thing? Susan explains, "Throughout our journey to become professional magicians, there were many setbacks and struggles, lessons learned, servings of humble pie, and heartwarming inspiration that lead to transformations. We call them 'butterfly moments,' where the caterpillar of hard work and persistence becomes beauty with wings."

The story begins like most, but with a twist. Yes, Roland received a magic set when he was a child and dreamed of becoming a magician. But then Roland grew up; his dreams of performing before cheering crowds was replaced with the knowledge that you have to make a living. He entered college and studied mathematics, earning a graduate degree in optical engineering. He went on to design some of the largest optical telescopes in the world. His career at the university was exciting and rewarding; however, he would sometimes think back on that childhood dream of performing magic.

Roland stayed connected to the magic world by visiting the Magic Castle, showing up at the local magic clubs every so often, and reading the occasional magic book, but he was not a magician. He was just someone who loved magic. Then one day a local S.A.M. Magician, Jay Knapp, suggested that he perform for kids at the local hospital pediatric ward. After perfecting a few routines, Roland found this extremely rewarding. Bringing moments of joy to children who are suffering had a profound impact on him.

Excited by his enjoyment at performing at the local hospital, Roland also tried his hand at restaurant performing. Before jumping into the tablehopping world, he consulted with a few professionals. He

was told that he should begin at the bottom, the very bottom. This is the place to make mistakes, to learn the craft in front of the toughest crowds, people who don't care about magic at all. Roland started performing table magic at a restaurant chain that served pizzas. It was not glorious, but it was highly educational.

"You have to learn how to grab attention and hold it with entertainment," says Roland. "I learned that nobody really cared about a magic trick. The patrons just wanted a vacation from their daily lives." When Roland was working the lower tier restaurants, his biggest lessons were on how to interact with people. His magic was improving, but honing his skills in social interaction and presentation was the bigger lesson.

After a time, his increased skills allowed him to move up the ladder of restaurants; in a few years he was working some of the highest end restaurants in town. He was also learning to perform a stand-up banquet show. From his restaurant work he would pick up the occasional corporate function. Suddenly, his magic life was beginning to overwhelm his engineering life.

A few years earlier, he was introduced to a dancer named Susan Eyed. She is a quirky, bohemian woman whose smile intoxicates all those around her. She learned dance while traveling around the world and was highly influenced by her adventures in Morocco and other foreign lands. At the time, Susan toured across the country and was performing in Tucson with a troupe she formed called Hadia Sahara or "Gift of the Desert." Susan was a master at luring her audience into her performance and infusing it with intense emotion. She explored and pushed the traditional forms of her craft by using non-traditional props and incorporating other influences and genres of dance; she was on the cutting edge of "ethno-modern belly dancing."

Roland found a unique type of inspiration in watching Susan's performance. It quickly changed the way in which he performed his magic. He knew he had to incorporate the richness of emotion and charm that Susan displayed in her dance. Soon, Roland and Susan were collaborating and giving feedback to one another after watching each other's acts. Susan loved watching Roland perform his precision-like magic and he loved watching her mysterious and enchanting dance. It wasn't long before they talked of combining their talents to form a unique act.

Roland and Susan began collaborating. Susan taught Roland movement and staging. Roland taught Susan magic. Suddenly, Roland found himself standing at a crossroads. If he wanted to grow and possibly become a professional in magic, a decision had to be made: either keep magic as that fun hobby, performing at a restaurant once or twice a week, or quit his job and realize the dream of becoming a full-time magician. This would become a butterfly moment of transformation. His university colleagues couldn't comprehend his decision when he went to his boss and quit. "That wasn't easy," explains Roland. "This was really a leap of faith. There is no sure money here, no weekly paycheck to count on, no health insurance, no unemployment, no disability, no retirement, and no vacation. It was very scary, but if I didn't jump into the deep end, I felt I would always be on the sideline of performing, pretending."

What made their act different from the beginning was their collaboration of building a show based on their unique strengths. Susan was not the usual dancer assistant handing props to the magician, but rather wanted to be a magician in her own right. From the start, she commanded the stage in her solo pieces. She incorporated her past experience from working in the trenches at street fairs, Arab nightclubs, homes for the aged, Mediterranean restaurants, and Renaissance Festivals into the world of magic. In fact, her insulation from the magic world was a huge benefit. This allowed Susan and Roland

to put their own creative spin on the classics of magic.

For example, when they began working on the Hindu basket at the beginning of their career, they actually had no idea how it worked. Susan was convinced the girl got in the basket and then slipped out the back to hide behind the prop. They decided to spin the basket to dispel that belief. In addition, their swords didn't insert from the top but rather all the way through the sides. Although this made handling (and hiding) much more difficult, it also gave the impression that twice as many spears were used. They hand constructed their first basket from an actual clothes hamper! Eventually, they retired the original homespun version and replaced it with a basket made to their specifications: not constructed by an illusion builder, but rather a craftsman specializing in wicker baskets for hot air balloons.

After months of preparation and rehearsal they premiered their first joint show. It was a dismal failure. "It was too esoteric and bizarre," bemoans Roland. This was not the start to his magical career that Roland hoped for after just quitting his lucrative job. Always upbeat and encouraging, Susan replied, "We couldn't let it get us down, so we just chalked it up as a learning experience!" This was to be the first of many setbacks ahead.

Roland and Susan knew that to grow, you need help. They searched out directors to look over their act and trusted professional friends to give brutally honest critiques. "It's not easy to hear that a piece you have worked on for months is a dreadful confusion of mixed up signals, but if you want to achieve beautiful magic, you fix it or ditch it," recalls Susan.

Slowly they improved. Susan had a few dance outfits that could work on the magic stage but the majority of their wardrobe would come from vintage and resale stores. She would cut, piece together, and add embellishments to ordinary clothing to create desirable, show-stopping, one-of-a-kind costumes. "I like giving things a second chance... people throw away the most amazing treasures," whispers Susan. They employed Roland's friends who built his astronomy instruments to construct magical pieces made from Susan and Roland's imagination. Their show began to gel and take form. Shaking his head, Roland remembers, "We would sometimes work on just three minutes of our act for weeks, trying to find just the right music, script, and movement."

They took every gig, no matter how challenging it was. They performed at clubs in front of the inebriated, the ambivalent, and the apathetic. They worked various company picnics, banquets, or employee appreciation parties; they were sometimes treated like royalty, other times they were treated like servants. They stuck it out in the cold and rain. They worked at street fairs, festivals, and community events, where they might or might not have a stage. Other times, they were on the grass, in the dirt, or on steaming hot parking lots. They played to crowds numbering in the thousands and at a Fringe Festival in Des Moines, where there were only two guests in the audience: one was a paid ticket holder and the other was the ticket taker!

They marched on through county fairs that were devoid of the shade, and learned how to keep the dust out of their speakers and prevent their tables from blowing over. Their dressing rooms ranged from the rare green room, to cramped closets, to the back of their van. At one tough outdoor venue, in the middle of their show, like clockwork, Budweiser's famous team of Clydesdales clippity-clopped a few feet right behind the audience. So how did they handle this? Sometimes they stopped the show and acknowledged the horses, other times they worked the distraction into a joke, and sometimes they just kept going as they held the audience's attention. Nothing worked every time. However they kept learning; their magic was evolving, and so was their relationship.

After years of forging their act in the fires of live audiences, they finally had a solid show. Just when they thought they had arrived, they learned that having a great show was only the first part of the equation. To get to the next level of success, they would have to learn the business side of show business. “We promised ourselves we would not be starving artists, so we made ourselves learn that part of our profession,” adds Susan.

They discovered a niche market in their state by performing for the hundreds of retirement resort communities found throughout Arizona. The insular market was difficult to break into but after paying the high fees for showcases and marketing to them for years, they were finally getting booked. It was a great training ground from an older audience who grew up watching live entertainment. “If they don’t like something in your act, they’d tell you about it,” confides Roland. The high-season coincided with the end of the corporate season, which was perfect. However, another set-back was just around the corner. National companies were creating tours for that same market. These companies would supply an entire year’s stable of “name” performers, which eliminated the need for each resort to negotiate with every entertainer. Since Roland and Susan were not with an agency, their fifty gigs a year from this market turned into less than five.

Over the next couple of years Roland and Susan continued to perform but more and more of their time was spent developing their marketing. Hiring a graphic designer, photographers, finding a Web site expert, developing print materials, and creating videos were the next challenges. “We were quite naïve when we started the business side of our business. We had only thought of ourselves as performers. Suddenly, we realized, like it or not, we were business people,” remembers Susan. “We were reading more books and magazines on business than magic.”

They were now working some high-end gigs. They were hired as house entertainers at the exclusive Canyon Ranch and Miraval resorts, whose guests include movie stars and the ultra-rich. They performed in the small rooms of casinos, small performing arts centers, and chic clubs around the state.

Then they landed a dream job. They were contracted to play the main stage at a large casino in Albuquerque. They played two shows, each to over a thousand people. The casino needed posters, print materials, videos, and a marketing angle that would be used on the massive outdoor marquee and, thanks to their focus on the business side, they delivered. Their marketing efforts had paid off. Performing on a seventy-two foot rock-star stage with a million-dollar lighting and sound system was a huge thrill.

Roland and Susan finally achieved success and then...the economy tanked. Businesses all over the country were struggling to stay alive and “entertainment” was no longer in anyone’s budget. “If we wanted to continue to perform we would again have to reinvent ourselves,” says Roland. “It was time for another butterfly moment!” adds Susan.

Instead of chasing audiences cross country, they wanted tourists and locals to come to them by creating their own theater in which to perform every weekend. They approached many locations throughout the state, looking for one that would not only be a great venue but a profitable business as well. Weeks of searching turned into months. In fact, almost after a year of searching and testing numerous markets in Arizona, they finally found their location. They negotiated with a resort hotel in the heart of Tucson and began preparations to launch The Carnival of Illusion Theater.

Up to this point in time, Roland and Susan had very little contact with the magic world. They had focused their efforts at becoming successful with lay audiences. The only magic conventions they had

attended were the 2006 FISM in Stockholm and the combined S.A.M. I.B.M. convention in Louisville. So it was quite the surprise when they received a call from Hank Moorehouse asking them to open the final night Gala Show at Abbott's Magic Get-Together in 2009. "He was a man of few words, but they meant a lot. He had faith in us and we will forever be grateful to him. We were a bit apprehensive, because we had never performed for magicians before," recalls Susan. "But we just went out there and did our job." They were very well received, getting a standing ovation and the prestigious Jack Gwynne Award for Excellence in Magic. They were teary-eyed and stunned when they accepted their award. "That was a huge thrill in our career," exclaims Susan.

In the fall of 2009, they opened their first season of Carnival of Illusion with sixty-two sold out performances. However, there were still more details to refine: the marketing, the publicity, and improvement of the theatrical atmosphere. "You want to say that's it, but you know that moment is very short-lived. There's always room for improvement both for the show and the business side," says Susan.

In February 2011, Sarlot and Eyed wanted to celebrate a special occasion in their career, so they created a fundraiser and partnered with a local non-profit arts organization that transports rural school children to the city and connects them with art and artists. At last, they would be celebrating their 1,000th show in just seven years of performing together. Roland laughs, "It's been an absolute whirlwind."

Currently, Roland and Susan are in their third year with Carnival of Illusion. They perform over 150 shows a year, ninety in their theater; the vast majority of the shows are sold out. They have since hired staff to help them in the marketing and operations of their show. Roland and Susan are constantly on the go, either working on their act or working on their business. "We enjoy our life because we have each other, we have magic, and we have fantastic audiences," says Susan. Roland adds, "I never thought when I was that kid with a dream of becoming a magician, that it would take this much blood and sweat!"

If you come up to Roland and Susan and tell them how lucky they are, they will both smile and tell you a long story about hard work – and butterflies.