

Sarlot and Eyed

HIGH-CALIBER CONJURING

by Dolly Spalding

Every great city needs a resident pair of magicians and Tucson has Roland Sarlot and Susan Eyed, a married couple who call their act "Carnival of Illusion." Resident, in this case, means that they live here and have an ongoing performance series at the Doubletree Inn, Fridays and Saturdays through the end of May. They'll return in September for the winter.

For many, the idea of a magic show is linked to what they might have seen on television, either cheesy low-key vaudevillian acts or spectacular extravaganzas à la David Copperfield, Doug Henning, Penn & Teller, et al. Before the mid-nineteenth century, so-called magic was relegated to street fairs and traveling circuses, but daring practitioners of conjuring emerged during the Victorian era and ushered in the custom of performing magic tricks for small groups in parlours and other intimate venues. Additionally, books were written, séances and ghost hunting became popular, and a sense of mystery was cultivated and explored. All the rage in upper-echelon, polite society, that phenomenon is being re-created by Sarlot and Eyed.

What sets their presentation apart from the typical card tricks, sleight-of-hand and mentalist experiments are self-deprecating humor, theatricality and the obvious skill with which they astound and delight their small (35 people at a maximum) audiences. When the person

who's watching you perform your razorblade swallowing conjuration is five feet away, any misstep will spoil the secret of the illusion. So, Roland Sarlot has practiced his craft thousands of times until not even the slightest hesitation mars any trick's perfect execution, and as a result (they've done over 1,000 shows together), they were the National Recipients in 2009 for "Excellence in Magic."

Susan Eyed grew up in rural Michigan and dreamed of traveling the world, influenced by Cousteau and magicians on TV, the glamour of movies, beautiful gowns and fancy makeup. As soon as possible, she escaped briefly to college and then it was off to see the world on a University of Pittsburgh-sponsored trip.

"I longed to be elsewhere," she said. After a career with her own Tucson dance company, she met Roland at an art opening in 1997, and they became a working duo first, then a romantic couple. Although she assumed she'd be the stereotypical pretty assistant, he pronounced her "too strong to just be an assistant," so she's an equal partner, doing magic on her own with the help of research facilitated by a collection of antique books on the subject.

Roland harks from Los Angeles, where magic was his first love and where proximity to the famous Magic Castle in Hollywood stimulated his interest. Carnival of Illusion played this legendary

venue to enthusiastic crowds during mid-April; a "belt notch," crowed Susan. Roland exchanged magic for math in high school, and ended up working in Tucson in the field of astronomy. Ultimately, though, he returned to his first love and, aura of 1890s sensibility. It's not really an act — they live it.

That love for the history of the art is so obvious in the passion that these two demonstrate; their eagerness to share their expertise is infectious. And although they are serious about what they do, their show is anything but. Because they believe that "the close quarters make it fun," a light touch, what they deem "variety within a variety," and humor lead inexorably to a dramatic and intense, even slightly dangerous, culmination.

"Our job is to take people on an hour and a half vacation," and, "We want people to ponder a little. The magic happens in them. People want to believe. The impossible can happen — it's all a metaphor." •

Performances Fridays and Saturdays, 6 p.m. and 8:30 p.m., through May at Doubletree, 445 S. Alvernon Way. www.carnivalofillusion.com (520) 615-5299.