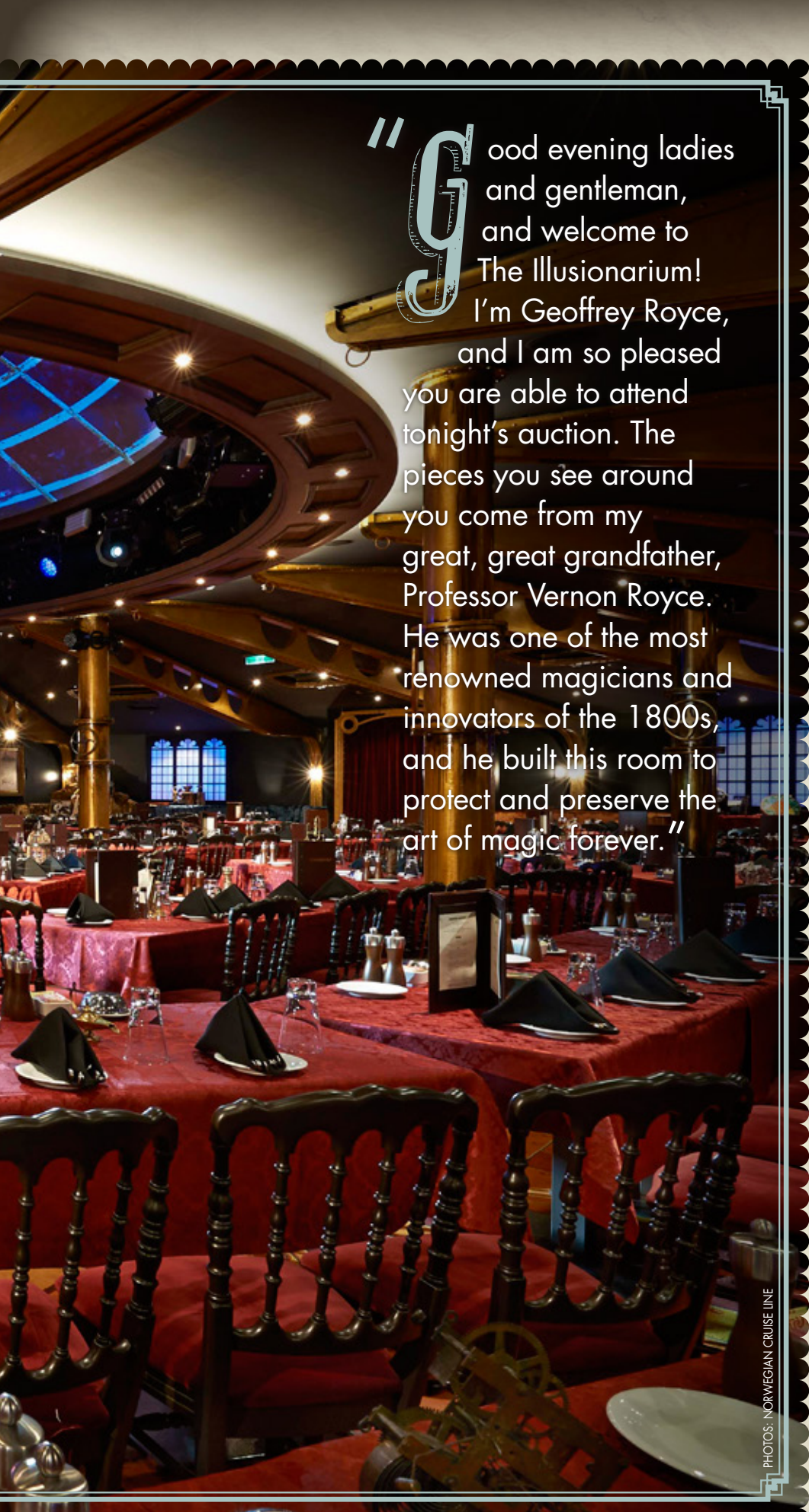




THE
ILLUSIONARIUM
BY RORY JOHNSTON & STAN ALLEN



"Good evening ladies and gentleman, and welcome to The Illusionarium! I'm Geoffrey Royce, and I am so pleased you are able to attend tonight's auction. The pieces you see around you come from my great, great grandfather, Professor Vernon Royce. He was one of the most renowned magicians and innovators of the 1800s, and he built this room to protect and preserve the art of magic forever."

With those words, the audience is drawn into a most unusual theatrical experience, part historical drama, part hysterical drama, and 100 percent magical.

The Illusionarium is a special place, a steampunk workshop where a mechanical man comes to life, a goddess drops in from the heavens, and some of the world's greatest magicians appear to battle for the honor of becoming the curator of this museum of magical artifacts.

The audience of just over 200 found this mystical place not by following ancient maps or trudging to some exotic location, but simply by walking down the hallway on Deck Six of the *Norwegian Getaway*, the newest 4,000-passenger cruise ship in the Norwegian Cruise Lines armada. The guests have paid an additional charge of \$29.99 to enjoy a steak-and-shrimp dinner and see the 90-minute show. As they walk through the elaborate entrance hall and enter the Victorian-themed theater — a bit like stepping back in time to a fairytale world where even the wait staff are costumed characters — they immediately sense that it was worth the extra charge. The centerpiece of the room is a fifteen-foot raised circular platform, almost entirely surrounded by tables and booths. Above the stage is an impressive dome, appearing to be made of stained glass.

The show begins with a fussy little man, Geoffrey Royce (Jeff Hobson), preparing for an auction of magical memorabilia and props that have been in his family for generations. Having lost his love for the art, Geoffrey no longer has any use for the "junk." But before he can commence, a clockwork replica of Professor Royce comes to life and, with a grand gesture, seals the room as klaxons go off and portholes slam shut. The dome, now a video screen, puts on a show of its own: giant gears and pistons close a blast shield that when opened reveals stars shining down and an ethereal goddess taking form in the heavens. With a flash of white light, she is now standing center stage. The Goddess and the Professor team up to stop the sale of the priceless antiques and summon the Masters from another dimension, with the goal of selecting a new curator for the museum. One at a time, four grandmasters of magic are presented, each vying for the honor of being the new guardian. They are Michael & Melanie Giles, Losander, Alain Nu, and Dimmare.

Along the way, Geoffrey rediscovers just how special the art of magic can be and begs for a chance to have the honor of becoming the curator himself. After a comical take on the Sword Basket, which doesn't turn out ex-



Displays line the hallway leading to the showroom.

actly as planned, he finally performs a hilarious but clever act and wins the competition.

Now assured that the Illusionarium and its precious contents will remain in the family, Professor Royce and the Goddess depart. The stained-glass dome returns — only to shatter into a million pieces, raining down on the stage. In the night sky above, the stars shift, forming the images of the Professor and the Goddess. He gives a thumbs up, she blows a kiss, and they both turn into a shooting star that rockets across the sky into distant space.

It's quite the show.

The project was a collaboration of many, but the driving forces were Richard Kilman, Director of Entertainment Programming & Development at Norwegian Cruise Line, and magician Jeff Hobson.

During the late 1980s, Kilman was working as an agent, booking comedians and variety acts out of Los Angeles. One of his regular hangouts was the Magic Castle. He loved the place, especially the immersive environment for magic — a

memory that would stick with him. It was there that he first met Hobson and booked him for a cruise.

Twenty years later, in 2008, Kilman joined Norwegian Cruise Lines just as the company was envisioning the 4,100-passenger mega-ship called the *Epic*. Eight years earlier, the line had taken the typical cruise dining model — dinner in a main dining room, followed by a show in the theater, and perhaps a lounge for music and drinks afterwards — and thrown it overboard. NCL replaced it with something called “Freestyle Cruising.” Basically, let the passengers eat when they want to eat, where they want to eat, and with whom they want to eat. Specialty restaurants were opened, including upscale dining experiences for an extra charge. And it worked. Passengers loved it.

For the *Epic*, the company decided to extend the freestyle approach to entertainment. Large theaters were shrunk from 1,200 seats to almost half. A 250-seat comedy club and 170-seat blues club were

added, as well as a 230-seat venue in the style of a *spiegeltent*. Then the question was: *What should we put into these purpose-built entertainment venues?* That's where Richard came in.

The *Epic* launched in 2009 with a variety of upscale entertainment running nightly for guests, including *Blue Man Group*, *Legends in Concert*, *Cirque Dreams & Dinner*, and *Howl at the Moon*. Again, passengers loved it. Four years later, the *Norwegian Breakaway* joined the fleet, offering *Rock of Ages*, *The Second City*, *Cirque Dreams Jungle Fantasy*, and more.

Like the *Epic* and *Breakaway*, the new *Norwegian Getaway* would partner up with established entertainment brands: *Legally Blonde: the Musical*, *Burn the Floor*, *Howl at the Moon*, and *The Grammy Experience*. And for the first time, it would also present a show solely produced by NCL. Drawing on fond memories of the Magic Castle, Kilman wanted the new show to be a magic show. And he didn't just want a headline act. He wanted some-



Geoffrey Royce (Jeff Hobson) begins the auction.



Special effects are scattered throughout the showroom.



The video dome segues between performances.

thing special, “like a new Magic Castle — the Magic Castle *reinvented* — to showcase magic in a cool environment.”

Mike Flesch, Senior Vice-President of Hotel Operations at NCL, is Kilman’s boss. “He’s in charge of everything that touches the guests,” explains Richard. “I’m the idea guy, and I pitch my ideas to Mike.” The idea that Richard pitched was to present magic in a unique environment, intimate and almost surrounded, then trick out the room to create an immersive magical experience. “I got Mike to come to Los Angeles with me to go to the Castle, and he caught on to what I was saying. I told him I knew the guy I wanted to work with, who knew everyone *and* had a killer act.” And that guy was Jeff Hobson.

“I picked up the phone one day,” Jeff recalls, “and this guy says, ‘Hi, this is Richard Kilman. Do you remember me?’

When I replied that I didn’t, he said, ‘I booked you on Norwegian Cruise Lines when I saw you perform at the Magic Castle.’ I quickly back-peddled as I did



Norwegian Getaway

remember the man, but not his name. That was two decades ago!”

A couple of good meetings with Jeff resulted in some seed money to work up a show treatment. “It had been awhile since

I had a formal request to pitch a show to a major player,” Jeff says, “but I soon had some ideas brewing. Let’s take a little Jules Verne, Hogwarts, H.G. Wells, Addams

Family, throw it all in the mix and see what comes up. Richard wanted a cool venue with performances by the world’s greatest magicians, but it had to be set within a template space already under construction. I knew what the room would look like since it was similar to the theaters NCL used for their circus shows. I couldn’t imagine a venue more adverse to a magic show! A mostly surrounded stage with little-to-no backstage space and an audience close enough

to see wrinkles in your shirt. I realized hiring magicians for this venue would be a challenge. Topping all of this off with dinner being served while the acts performed had me doubt the project more than once.”



Geoffrey Royce unknowingly conjurors up...



...Professor Vernon Royce and the Astral Goddess.



Nevertheless, within a few days, the outline and basic proposal were done.

“It started with the name, *The Illusionarium*, which went back to 1996 when Mark Kalin and I were thinking about a title for our show, and among sixty or seventy ideas was *Illusionarium*. That became one of the ‘areas’ in the *Carnival of Wonders*, but it was only mentioned at one point in the show. It was always in the back of my mind as a cool name. The living skeleton from *Carnival* was always fun, so I thought, *Make it steampunk, more upper crusty, add a monocle*. Early on, that character became the curator of the *Illusionarium* — Professor Vernon, named after Dai Vernon. So that was the crux — the *Illusionarium* and this 150-year-old guy who’s been kept alive through steampunk means and keeps this secret underground place filled with

cool stuff, and hosts the grandmasters of magic for everyone to see.”

“We went through a couple of rounds,” Richard says, “and while it was not quite



Under construction in Germany.

where we wanted it to be, we had enough to make an initial presentation.”

“The day of the pitch came with a surprise,” explains Jeff. “I had planned and practiced my talk more than I had ever

practiced a single trick in my life. What I didn’t know was that the pitch was *too* good. Smack in the middle of my presentation for all the major execs of Norwegian, I was stopped by CEO Kevin Sheehan as he exclaimed, ‘This is great! Say no more. We want to do this!’ It helped that my pitch came at exactly the right time — the week that the film *Hugo* was released. It helped sell the idea that this was an emerging concept.”

One of the things that surprised Jeff was the tentative budget. He had written the show with a limited budget in mind because “all companies want to do everything as inexpensively as possible — or so I thought.” But Norwegian wanted this to be a big project, so their first self-produced production in a custom venue was given a multimillion-dollar budget. Hobson soon realized *The Illusionarium*



Michael & Melanie Giles



Alain Nu

was heading into uncharted territory that demanded both patience and understanding between himself and the administration. They hired professional lighting, sound, scenery, and video designers from the film and theater industry, with credits ranging from Disney to Broadway.

“I wanted a Broadway scenic designer to help us create this world that would marry with Jeff’s initial story,” Richard says. “We talked to a lot of people. I felt an instant connection with David Gallo, Tony award-winning designer [*The Drowsy Chaperone*, *Memphis*]. Our initial phone call lasted a couple of hours, talking about all the things we could do. He was all over it. Before we even had a contract, he spent hours developing renderings. It blew me away.”

Gallo not only designed the totally immersive showroom, but also the wonderful museum foyer leading into it. The hall is lined with stacks of drawers and shelves holding unusual antique props and memorabilia collected by set decorator Keen Gat. The top drawer of each stack actually

opens and the contents can be seen under Plexiglas shields.

David originally designed the stained-glass dome that tops the room as a static set piece, but then had the idea to make it an LED projection system. After seeing a demonstration of 3-D Video Mapping, Richard loved the concept. He hired specialist Ryan Usalesky, who installed six projections with image blending. Making this work in a dome was a little different; doing it on a ship with vibration was *very* different. Special shock-absorbing brackets had to be designed to hold the projectors, along with a custom calibration system so the images could be lined up. The video dome also requires a full-time tech to maintain it.

A multidirectional sound system was installed to do justice to the special effects and music scored by Ed Kessel. Ed had actually started his showbiz life doing magic from age eleven to fourteen. When he got the call to submit a demo, he was very excited. “When I started reading the script all about Kellar, Blackstone, Herrmann, and all these

names, a big smile came over my face. I really wanted the project, so I went all out in my demo and was thrilled when they picked me. I really loved doing it because it was like revisiting an old world I used to be part of.”

Not only did Ed write the background score and all the music for the videos and interludes, but he also composed original music for all of the acts — most significantly, James Dimmare’s bird act. “Rhapsody in Blue” has always been Dimmare’s music. But because that song is so strongly associated with the United Airlines advertising campaign, NCL asked for it to be changed.

“It was an interesting challenge to do James’ act,” Ed says, “because it was very specifically choreographed to ‘Rhapsody in Blue,’ which speeds up and slows down throughout. So I watched the video of his act with the sound turned off and I scored it as if I was scoring a movie. That way, I was able to bring out the flourishes and accents and come up with a whole new sound for him. I knew it would be a departure for him, because he’d used the same music

Losander



Jeff Hobson



for so long.” And it was a little tough for James, who’s doing a slightly shorter version of the act — seven minutes, seven doves. “At first, I couldn’t wrap my head around not using ‘my’ music,” says Dimmare, “but within four rehearsals, it was okay. Now, I’m finding the beats to my movement and I’m rocking it.”

Costume designer Eduardo Secondo was brought in to create a cohesive look for the characters, the Maitre D’, the wait staff, and even the show technicians. Some of the acts were able to modify their existing costumes, and Dimmare was left unchanged because his white tie and tails is a timeless look.

When it came to lighting, Kilman wanted someone with magic experience. Don Guy has designed the lighting for *Carnival of Wonders*, Rick Thomas’ show, and *Masters of Magic*. “Lighting on three sides for an audience who is sitting very close brought lots of challenges. Still, it was a delight to work on because most magic shows have short transitions between the acts, but not

the through-line of story that the director brought to this marriage of theater and magic. The teams on both sides soon developed a sense of trust, and by the end it was a great collaboration. Plus, every six months I get to go back and light the new acts of the replacement cast, which gives me something to look forward to!”

The script went through three different writers before John Schiappa took over. As the script expanded, it became necessary to include two live actors: Richard Price (Professor Vernon Royce) and Lindsay Ryan (Astral Goddess). Originally, Hobson wanted to avoid actors, but ultimately he had to become an actor himself.

“Sure, I acted in a dozen or so plays in high school and my post-high school days,” says Jeff, “but nothing prepared me for real acting with a Broadway-experienced director at the helm. The ‘fish out of water’ analogy comes to mind! I experienced extreme frustration, while the director and the other real actors had their patience tested.” Hobson is the last of the five magicians to

appear, performing a fifteen- to twenty-minute set with Card in Mouth, Egg Bag, and watch steals. His spot, while as funny as ever, is a little less “flamboyant,” if you will. With Geoffrey’s character arc, Jeff didn’t feel that material fit.

No production is without its difficulties, and this one did run into a few major problems. Once the showroom was constructed, the team discovered that there was limited visibility along the outside perimeter. The people sitting there didn’t have a good view of the roof dome, where many of the effects take place, including the climax of the show. Something had to be done to compensate. Video monitors were added so those audience members could get the idea of what was going on in the dome. But that wasn’t enough. Management wanted to somehow enhance the experience in those seats so they would get something the rest of the audience didn’t, evening out the score. Jeff suggested the company go back to Bill Smith’s Magic Ventures to create environmental effects for the outside booths.

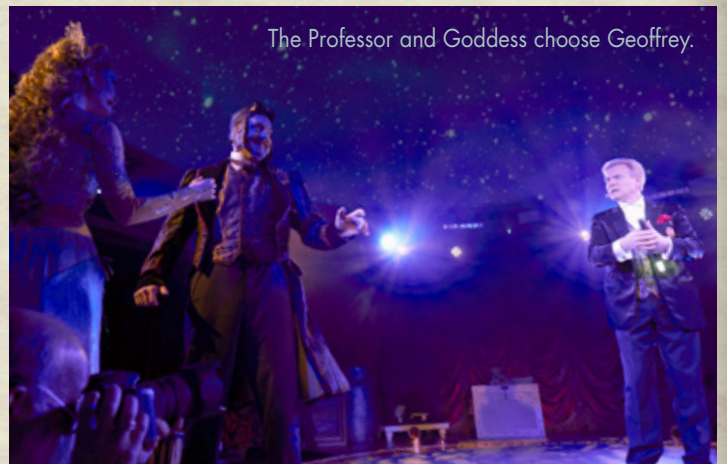
Dimmare



Jeff Hobson



The Professor and Goddess choose Geoffrey.



Bill had originally been brought in to create a few illusions for the show: the Sword Basket, a chest full of light and smoke, a silk “spirit” that flies out of it into the chest of the mechanical man, and the cabinet that changes the robot into a real man. He also created effects for the foyer entrance, such as a mirror in which a classic magician’s face appears and whispers to the person looking into it. Now he returned to enhance the experience for the people in the rear of the showroom. He teamed up with Kerry Pollock to engineer dining tables that slowly raise four inches over 45 minutes, then jump another two inches during the explosive climax in the show. Bill also installed thumpers in the seat, paintings that drop off walls, a collapsing Tiffany lamp, and more effects throughout the entire venue.

Finding the grandmasters of magic was also a challenge, because of the constraints of the room and the six-month commitment. The first people chosen were Giles, Dimmare, and Losander.

“No matter how many acts you see on video,” Hobson explained, “you ultimately have to go with people you can trust, who have a track record for success. Consistency. We have no room for one good show, one bad show. I’ve known these guys for years, and they work surrounded. Yep. That’s why they’re here.”

Once the showroom was created and the cast hired, it was critical to find the right person to bring it all together. Broadway director Patti Wilcox [*Motown the Musical*] was selected to helm the performances. Jeff consulted with her about the limitations of magic in such a difficult environment. “For example,” says Jeff, “Patti envisioned a show with no blackouts, but I had written special effects and illusions into the script that could not be done with the state-of-the-art video dome without exposing the secrets. In the end, compromise was the key word.”

After the first two months, all of the magicians, who enjoy guest status on board the ship, think it’s a good gig. When asked what is the best part of the experience, Los-

ander answers, “I love the venue, because I think that’s how magic should be seen.” He presents a flaming dancing staff, a bubble routine, thumb tie with a chain, and his signature Floating Table, complete with the vanish of the table at the end. “Performing very close to the audience and fully surrounded is a big challenge for magicians, but my act was designed from the start to be performed under any conditions. I really like that the audience is so close that they can literally feel the magic.”

Mike Giles and his wife Melanie do the opening magic segment: the Throne Chair production, Origami Box, Silk in Apple, and a Sub Trunk. He says, “The best part of the experience for me is it’s been a while since I worked six days a week, two shows a night. Believe it or not, that’s the *good* part! It’s hard to stay on top of the game, so I’m actually enjoying it.” He adds, with a laugh, “We’ll see how long that lasts.” When asked what is the *worst* part, he gives the same answer: “Doing a job six days a week, two shows a night!” He then



The video dome “explodes” for the grand finale.

adds, “Honestly, it’s probably the monotony of the job, going to the same places over and over again.” Of course, if you have to visit the same places over and over again each week, Miami, St. Maarten, St. Thomas, and the Bahamas are not that bad.

All agree that being out for six months leaves them missing home and family. Thanks to the Internet and FaceTime, they do manage to stay in touch.

Maritime law limits the amount of time people are allowed to work at sea without a break, so the cast of *The Illusionarium* must change out every six months. This is no small feat. New music, costumes, lighting, and staging will all be required. Hobson, who is responsible for booking all of the magicians, has already signed replacement Masters: Thommy Ten & Amélie, Joseph Gabriel, Jerome Murat,

and Jaehoon Lim, who has been excused from his stint in the Korean army because this is such a tremendous opportunity.

But since Jeff plays the main character role in the production — and also must

real challenge. Bruce Gold is the first one scheduled to take on that challenge as he and the balance of the new cast and crew take over the middle of May.

The Illusionarium, which has been drawing strong numbers, is set to remain on the *Norwegian Getaway* for three years, and possibly much longer. Currently, Richard Kilman closely monitors the success of the show from his office in Miami, keeping an eye on the ratings generated from audiences. Jeff’s job as the Artistic & Casting Director is to keep the show “magical” and book the best grandmasters of magic into one of the most unique venues in the world,



The Goddess bids farewell.

wow the audience with his final act, which wins the “audition” — it raises the question: can he be replaced? How many show-stopping magicians are out there who are also good actors? It’s a

perhaps the most ambitious theatrical environment at sea, where the worlds of legitimate theater, magical performance, and the cruise industry have melded together in a weird and quite wonderful way. ■