



# LA MAGA LUPE

## A Backstage Life in the Spotlight

BY ALAN HOWARD • • • • •

When Guadalupe Maria Ah Chu was twelve or thirteen years old, she spent Saturday mornings watching a children's television program that was broadcast from her hometown of Panama City, Panama. After telling her mother that she intended to be on that program, young Lupe took a bus to the television station and asked where she could find the producer of the show.

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A secretary said he was out to lunch at the moment, but told Lupe the name of the restaurant. "I just went there and saw him," Lupe recalls, "and said 'I want to be on your TV show.'" When he asked the girl what she would do on the show, she answered, "Magic."

More than thirty years later, Lupe Nielsen reflects back on her bold move to get on TV. "I don't know why he agreed," she wonders. "He probably thought I was cute or whatever, but he had me on a show." She hadn't even done any magic for him in the restaurant; he just took her word for it. But the producer liked what she did on the program and booked her for another show. Her appearances attracted attention in Panama City, letting people know who she was and

that she did magic, which brought her more bookings for birthday party shows.

Lupe first became fascinated with magic at the age of four, when a family friend showed her a simple dollar bill trick. Holding the bill so the portrait of George Washington was right side up, the man folded the bill and then unfolded it to show that George had turned upside down. "That really intrigued me," Lupe says. "He taught me the trick, and I thought that was the neatest thing."

Lupe was enthralled. When she learned how to read, the first book she checked out of the library was called *Magic Secrets*, a children's book in English. "It had a few little tricks, like the Paper Cup Through the Table, and some other things." What most captured her interest about magic was the puzzle

aspect; she was curious about how the tricks worked. And while Lupe didn't necessarily approach magic as entertainment that she could provide for others, people were amused by the tricks she was learning. A neighbor asked Lupe to perform magic for a birthday party, and afterward asked her how much she charged. Ten-year-old Lupe considered the question. The first figure that came to mind was five dollars. So, Lupe was paid five dollars for her first performance. "I realized, *Oh wow, I can make some money out of this!* So I started doing birthday parties for children, and eventually my fees went up."

No one else in her family took up an interest in magic or performing, but they did not discourage Lupe's hobby. Her father, an electrical engineer, had an analytical mind and



was not always fooled by the tricks, but it did happen sometimes. Her mother provided rides to the shows that Lupe had begun giving around the city.

There were very few magicians Lupe could see in Panama, let alone learn from. She had once seen "an old-timer" named Lopez do a birthday party show, but never met him. There was also a magician named Marko who showed her how to do a couple of tricks, but Lupe became largely self-taught. She made her props herself, platform effects such as a Square Circle crafted from a box and a cereal canister, making trips to the hardware store for paint, ropes to cut and restore, and other supplies. She was fortunate to be enrolled in a school where classes were taught in both Spanish and English, greatly expanding her options for magic literature from the local library. It was not until she was twelve that Lupe found her first magic shop, which she discovered on a trip to Miami, Florida.

"I didn't know about magic shops," she says, "but when I came to the States, someone told me about them." She looked in the phone book and found the Biscayne Magic & Joke Shop, where she spent all her savings. "I bought tons of stuff!"

People began calling her "La Maga Lupe" (Lupe the Magician), although she has always simply billed herself as Lupe (pronounced "loo-pay"), with no title and no last name. After her appearances on Saturday morning television, Lupe was busy performing every weekend, often doing three shows a day, mostly working birthday parties and other family shows, and "driving my mom crazy until I got my driver's license."

On television and at parties, Lupe performed familiar effects such as Professor's Nightmare, the Magic Coloring Book, Torn & Restored Newspaper, and the like. "I even did the wand that was wrapped in a piece of tissue and vanished, then reappeared elsewhere — the paper shell wand with wooden tips. Nothing fancy."

When Lupe turned fourteen, she began attending theater school — in addition to her regular seven hours of daily classes. The theater classes ran from late afternoon to early evening, and were followed by late nights hanging out with her theater friends, working or seeing every possible show they could. "It was a general theater school," says Lupe. "I had to take classes in everything, but I didn't like the performing as much as I loved backstage things." At school, she was a tech and studied acting, but did not do magic there.

Outside of school, Lupe was still busy as a teenage magician, doing solo shows, pattering

(in Spanish) through her parlor tricks and an occasional stage effect. There was one occasion when a client wanted an illusion; Lupe agreed that she could do it. Finding some workshop plans from Abbott's, Lupe and her brother made a Substitution Trunk. "We made the trunk out of oak," she smiles, "so it weighed a ton. But we built it, and it had a nice upper trap, and I was able to learn the illusion." She conned one of her theater buddies into helping with the performance, with Lupe taking the role of the performer who first gets locked in the trunk, then suddenly appears on top. The show was a success, but she did not make the trick a regular part of her act. "Travel with that trunk? Oak? No way! That was stupid," she laughs. Lupe says the trunk is still around, sitting on her mother's porch. "And it's termite free," she notes.

While she continued her busy performance schedule, Lupe was becoming more fascinated with the technical aspects of theater, working backstage at school and at a friend's dance studio. When the time came to choose a college, she took courses at a branch of Florida State University in the Canal Zone, but as they only had liberal arts and general education classes, she moved to the FSU campus in Tallahassee to enter the theater department. She arrived in the US on January 1, 1985.

Lupe wanted to do technical theater, but her engineer father didn't think anyone could make a living at that, so she was talked into



*Fiesta de Navidad ofrecida por el Club 20-30*

Una vista del programa que se desarrolló en el parque "Omar Torrijos" por miembros del Club Activo 20-30 y las Damas, para más de 350 niños, hijos de los enfermos del centro de salud Amadeo Mastellari. Este agasajo forma parte del programa de bienestar

social que auspicia esta prestigiosa organización cívica. Presidido por el Licdo. Claudio Lacayo, los pequeños disfrutaron durante varias horas de una actividad amena para celebrar la Navidad.



#### LA MAGA LUPE

Juvenil ilusionista panameña quien se presenta el domingo 31 del presente mes en el Teatro Bella Vista, en función que ha sido denominada "Una Loca Loca Aventura de Domingo" La función es partir de las 9 y 30 de la mañana.

*A news clipping showing sixteen-year-old Lupe performing in Panama in 1982. [Below] The "juvenil ilusionista" in 1983.*

attending Virginia Tech to study electrical engineering. She stuck with it for more than two years and did well, but didn't like it, so she changed majors and graduated with a theater degree. She got plenty of experience, especially in the summers, when no one else wanted to be on campus. While the student population dwindled, the summer theater season continued. Lupe acted as stage manager for nearly every show, which trained her to be a "stage manager and gofer *par excellence*."

She had made very little time for conjuring during her college years, not even doing magic for fun. Her academic schedule and backstage work took up too much time. Magic came back into her life when she was one semester away from graduating. Lupe attended a theater recruitment fair and was offered a position as carpenter for an opera company in the mountains of North Carolina. "The pay was very poor," she says, "and I didn't have a car at the time. That was a problem. I told them I would call them back after I found some transportation." In the meantime, she spotted a poster on campus for Busch Gardens Williamsburg.





**"I auditioned, and they said, 'Wow, that's really good. Do another one!' So I did a third trick, hoping they wouldn't ask me for much more, because my repertoire only had four tricks."**



a theme park in Virginia. They were looking for magicians, and the pay was much better than the carpenter job.

The theme park specified that they wanted close-up magic. "I didn't do much close-up, but I knew where the literature was," says Lupe. "I practiced four close-up tricks. I auditioned and showed them two tricks. They said, 'Wow, that's really good. Do another one!' So I did a third trick, hoping they wouldn't ask me for much more, because my repertoire only had four tricks. They booked me on the spot. I was so surprised!"

Lupe doesn't recall exactly what tricks she did that day. "I think it was Danbury Delight [Frank Garcia's handling of a Charlie Miller card effect], something with sponge balls, and some thumb tip thing. They were good tricks, in the sense that I presented them well, I suppose. The guy booked me. I was surprised that they didn't just say, 'We'll call you back' or something.

I thought, *Okay, I got booked. Then, Damn, I need an act!*"

Busch Gardens expected her to do a twenty-minute show. Lupe added some more tricks to her repertoire, then she performed that close-up act more than 600 times during the summer of 1988, closing her set with a version of Card on Ceiling. She had a fun five- or six-month season in Williamsburg, and returned there for the summer of 1989, as well. In between, having finished school, she needed a job for the winter, so she went up to Massachusetts and worked at Hank Lee's Magic Factory. "I did everything there," she says, from working in the warehouse to packaging orders to demonstrating in the magic shop. "But Hank wouldn't pay too much. I couldn't afford to live in Boston with what he was paying at the time." Lupe had to quit because of the salary, but Busch Gardens hired her for another season.

Despite the low pay, she calls her time in Boston "one of my fondest memories in magic." She made friends within the magic community and did a few outside shows in the area, but never really tried to establish herself there as a full-time magician. But once she put together that first act for Busch Gardens, she stuck with the close-up magic, rather than going back to the platform work she had done in her younger years. She was traveling often, and the props were much easier to transport.

Lupe's stay in Massachusetts was relatively brief, but it was a life-altering time, primarily because of the people she met there, including Scotty York and Norm Nielsen, both of whom would later figure prominently in Lupe's life.

One of her favorite hangout spots in Boston was Ray Goulet's Magic Arts Studio, which was only three miles from where she lived. "Ray had every prop known to man,



*Lupe performing for the Houdini Club; posing with Panamanian magician Marko during a 2008 visit to their home country; creating latex doves in the Nielsen Magic workshop; displaying posters with Norm at the Los Angeles Conference on Magic History in 1997. John Booth presides over Norm and Lupe's 1998 wedding.*

and he had a good library." Lupe admits, "I would go in his shop and read all his books without buying them." She also attended magic club lectures and meetings there. One night, someone at the meeting asked her to get up and do some magic. "I did a trick, then went back to chitchat with people. And then someone said, 'Lupe won the trip to Worcester!' What the hell?" She hadn't even realized that she was in the local IBM Ring contest, but she won, with the prize being gas money and a registration to enter a state competition in Worcester, Massachusetts. Having never been in a competition before — at least, not one she knew about ahead of time — Lupe was terrified.

At that time, Scotty York was staying in a town north of Boston. He heard that Lupe was entering the contest in Worcester, and he approached her and said he'd like to see her act. She showed him what she had, and when he gave her his comments afterward, it was, in her words, "an eye-opening experience." Lupe says, "Scotty basically taught me about transitions. When you are performing magic, you can do any trick, but you must think about the transition from one trick to the next to the next. He showed me how to be two or three steps ahead on the previous trick; how to prepare for the subsequent effects in your routine. And then he came up with a brilliant ending to my little contest act."

Her act included "standard material," she says, but what made the act special was the transitions. Lupe concentrated on never putting her hands in her pockets, "or anywhere without having a reason to do so," and making transitions between routines fluid. "I was doing Matrix at the time, I vanished some coins, and I closed with a sponge bunny routine, a trick called Rabbit Explosion — standard stuff that was being done in the 1980s. But what was interesting was the sequence, with all the touches that Scotty helped me with on that little act."

Lupe won the contest in Worcester.

York told her to look him up if she ever got to Northern Virginia. So, when she moved to Centerville around 1990, she contacted York and studied with him for about three years. "That really helped me a lot. He was probably the most influential

mentor I've had in magic. He was infamous in many other areas, which we will not talk about in this interview," she laughs. "I was spared from the infamy, but I was quite amused at his persona. What was brilliant with Scotty and his magic was the routining, how he could take a trick that somebody else did and elevate it. It made me think about tricks in a different way. For example, Derek Dingle's Poor Charlie trick. If you read that routine, it has a lot of sleights, and at the end you cannot examine the cards, because they are gimmicked. Scotty said, 'What an idiot. You can't examine the cards and you're using a lot of sleights. Why don't you gimmick the cards even more and only do two or three sleights?' So he did just that and accomplished the same trick."

Through York, Lupe met "everybody who was anybody" in the close-up world. She served as a driver, taking everyone over

to York's house, "because Scotty was too lazy to go pick them up at their hotel." One of her favorite memories is of sessioning all night with York, J.C. Wagner ("one of my idols," she says) and other Washington DC-area magicians, trying to find "an even better method" for Wagner's Torn & Restored Card.

Throughout her career, Lupe never marketed or even thought of herself as "a female magician," not even when she first started out. In years of learning, competing, performing, and sessioning, "I was always treated as one of the boys. People started pointing it out to me, but whether you are male or female shouldn't make any difference." There was a time when she got a call from a Las Vegas agent asking about her magic, "but from the tone that he used, eventually I told him, 'If you expect me to be a six-foot-tall, well-endowed blonde who does card tricks, you're going to be very disappointed.'" She didn't get the job.



PHOTO: ANNE WHITE



"It's interesting to me," she says, "the separation of groups in society. I first noticed it in the United States; it's so typical here. The first time I had to fill in a questionnaire, they asked if I was black, white, Hispanic, or Asian. Well, my father was Chinese; my mother was Panamanian. I had to ask what I should put on the form. It's a contradiction in this country, because it's supposed to be a melting pot, but you get compartmentalized into groups. I never thought about categories that way until I came to the States." Getting back to female magicians, Lupe says, "I have met women magicians who capitalize on their femininity to get work. Nothing wrong with that, and if they've got it, flaunt it! In my case, I never thought of promoting myself as anything more than just a magician, doing magic tricks."

It's hard to make a living just hanging out with other magicians and sessioning, and Lupe needed to work. When she moved to Virginia, the first thing she did was head to a Kinko's and create a tri-fold brochure for promoting herself and her magic. Having sent it to all the party planners in the area, she

was soon booked solid through the end of the year. Being "the new kid in town" helped, but so did Lupe's openness to new opportunities. When an agent called and asked if Lupe could read palms in addition to doing magic, she quickly replied, "Sure, I can do palm reading!" As soon as she hung up the phone, Lupe went to a New Age bookstore, bought several books on palm reading, and started learning. The gig was a few weeks away, but first she had to meet with the client and pass an interview. "The meeting was at her office. I had no idea how to do palm reading," Lupe admits, "but I had to convince her that I could. I was lucky because, as it turned out, the lady was pregnant and very busy that day. She left her office for a moment, so I was all over her secretary — 'When is she due? When is her birthday? This is for something we're going to do later on.' I pumped the secretary for as much information as I could. When the lady came back, I did a reading on her, looking at her palm. And I did a magic trick, of course. But she was more impressed with the palm reading skills!"

When it came time for the event, Lupe started out the three-hour gig by doing walk-around magic, as usual. She didn't bring up the readings until one woman said that her boss had mentioned palm reading, and could Lupe read hers? Lupe read palms for the rest of the night, "and I got better as the night progressed!" She has not done any palm reading since that time. "But I could do it if I worked to get it back," she says. "Palm reading is a lot of — well, basically it's really cold reading."

When performance work dried up after the holiday season at the end of the year, Lupe again proved her adaptability by taking up a new career: bartending. Scotty York suggested that she should give it a try and, typically, Lupe thought *Why not?* She enrolled in a bartending school, which placed her at a restaurant, and naturally she was soon doing bar magic.

After a couple years in Virginia, she obtained a better job at the Melrose Bar in the Park Hyatt Hotel in Washington — not hired as a magician, but as a bartender who happened to do magic. She learned that a three-trick set was ideal for her situation, and she closed with a variation of the Bill Switch, borrowing a ten or a twenty and changing it into a pair of fives or tens. Very often, after performing that effect, the customers would let her keep the money. "I was always ready for a hundred; I could change it to two fifties. And a few hundreds came my way!"

Doing bar magic was lucrative, but eventually it came time for Lupe to move on to something else. Through Scotty York, she had met Nick Ruggiero. In 1993, she went to work for him at Collectors Workshop. Half of her job there was doing the accounting and paperwork, which made Lupe realize how difficult it could be to run a small business. Her other job at Collectors was "everything that the craftsmen did not want to do." As usual, Lupe jumped in and learned all she could. She made springs, polished a lot of brass, helped the cabinet makers cut small parts for tricks, and anything else that needed to be done. She also built some of the effects herself. One trick in particular, the Clock of San Marcos, was a solo effort. "I made the whole thing, from beginning to end. Nobody wanted to make that trick. It was one of the most tedious and thankless tricks to make, because you



*Norm and Lupe Nielsen at home, surrounded by magic history. [Facing page] Lupe the woodworker, and a table she created from the Kellar poster on the book jacket.*





have to hollow out an entire deck of cards in order to put a motor inside." Around the workshop, they started calling it the Clock of Saint Lupe.

"It was actually very enjoyable," Lupe says of the job. "It was a lot of fun." But after two years, she began itching to move on. Scotty told Lupe that he could get her an audition with Bill Malone, who was about to open a new magic bar in Florida. She also interviewed with Alan Zagorsky of Owen Magic Supreme, who offered her a job at his company. And she was reminded that Geno Munari, whom she'd met at a convention in Tennessee, had said that Lupe should come to Las Vegas to work for him.

After weighing the possibilities of Florida, California, and Nevada, Lupe opted to move to Vegas. The deciding factor for her was not the job, but the opportunity to study magic. It was 1995, and Mike Skinner was working in Las Vegas. A good friend of Scotty York's, Skinner agreed to let Lupe study with him. The two would get together every Monday night after he finished his job at the Golden Nugget. They'd go listen to the jazz band play at the Four Queens hotel, then return to the Golden Nugget coffee shop to work on magic.

"What was neat about Mike Skinner is that he had technique like nobody I have ever seen," Lupe remembers. "His technique was perfect. And he had the ability to memorize more tricks than anybody else, so you could ask him a question about anything and he had probably worked on that trick before. Mike basically taught me what a trick is supposed to look like. He wasn't the most entertaining magician I have ever seen, but it was just beautiful to watch him work, because every trick was perfect."



Lupe immersed herself in the Vegas magic scene. She was working for Geno as a demonstrator at his magic shop in the MGM Grand, gathering a crowd and selling tricks. She was studying magic with Skinner. And she was dating Norm Nielsen.

Norm and Lupe had met back in 1989, when she was working for Hank Lee. At the end of Hank Lee's Conclave that year, Norm — along with James and Lisa Dimmare — needed a very early morning ride from Cape Cod to the airport in Boston. As usual, Lupe took the job that no one else wanted, driving the guest magicians in Hank's minivan. Lupe and Norm chatted during the trip, and they kept in touch over the years.

By the mid-'90s, Las Vegas had become a magic Mecca, but there was plenty of room for more magicians, and Lupe was doing occasional close-up gigs of her own. In her walk-around sets, her standard opening effect was the Sandsational Cut & Restored Rope routine. Not only was it clean, visual magic, but she did not have to involve the onlookers any more than they wanted to be involved. "The first trick I did was an eye candy trick, to see if they were interested, and I kept my distance. If they were not interested, then the trick lasted only thirty seconds. 'Okay, magic girl, go away.' But if they liked me and liked what I did, then I could get closer to their space."

One of the aspects that drew Lupe into magic is the connection that can be made with other people. "That is the most important thing in close-up magic in particular — to connect with people." She believes that "performing magic for someone is more about the relationship you have with that person at that point than it is about the trick.

The trick is secondary." However, she admits that establishing that relationship with an audience was always difficult for her. Despite all of her experience as a performer, she still considers herself to be a "backstage" person. She explains, "I get more satisfaction by making another act look good than in being onstage myself."

Not enjoying "being too much in the spotlight," Lupe confesses to being "terribly nervous" before her shows. "That first moment, when you break the ice — that's the most important part of any show. In close-up, doing walk-around, you have to do that every ten or fifteen minutes! It's awful! Once I'm into it, it's fine. But to walk up to these people? They have more important things to talk about than to watch a card trick!"

In the 1990s, Connie Boyd was working as Norm Nielsen's assistant — not onstage, as Norm has always been a solo act, but helping him run his magic business. When Connie said she would be leaving, Norm asked Lupe to help him out. She said she was busy enough working for Geno Munari, but agreed to come in on her days off and assist Norm. That gradually turned into her full-time job. "It became more profitable to stay and help Norm out than to go and find close-up jobs."

Reviewing her qualifications for her duties at Norm Nielsen Magic, Lupe reflects, "I was performing magic for many years, was a backstage person before that, worked for Collectors Workshop for a couple of years — that's how I ended up with Norm. And he figured out he had to marry me, otherwise I would be gone!" The couple married in 1998.

Now, Lupe's career revolves around Norm and Nielsen Magic, makers and distribu-



tors of various props, posters, and more. “I do everything from packing, shipping, and advertising to cleaning, sorting, and organizing the collection. I’m a computer guru now, and Norm and I make the assorted props that we sell. It’s a small mom-and-pop business; we do everything ourselves. And now Norm makes the coffee, which is great!”

Outside of the business, Lupe keeps up with magic in general. And she goes to every magic lecture she can, because she likes to learn new things all the time. “I got into magic because of the puzzle aspect. I love methods. I want to know how it’s done. It doesn’t drive me crazy; I don’t spend sleepless nights, like some guys do. Magic has to be entertaining to make it appealing to audiences, but I love how clever magicians are in creating illusions for others.”

Although Lupe enjoys and appreciates a well-crafted trick, she was never one to invent them herself. “You have to have a special mind for that,” she feels. “I’m just adapting. I think, in magic, everything has already been invented, for the most part. It’s interesting to work on a method, but there is always somebody who has already invented it and probably does it better. But sometimes you can improve on something that’s out there.”

With a drive to be original even with tricks she did not invent, Lupe has always worked on unique presentations for the tricks she really likes. One of these was a routine for Dean’s Box, making the puzzle her own. She thinks some of the best money she ever spent was for Mike Close’s book that included his Pothole trick, and she’s also fond of Simon Aronson’s Shuffle-bored. “When I showed that to Norm for the first time, he walked away, because it’s a boring trick. I made it a point to work on the trick until he liked it. Eventually he did, and I performed it when we worked at the Magic Castle.”

Lupe also has an appreciation for magic history. “If I could go to only one convention, it would be the Los Angeles Conference on Magic History. It’s my favorite. I had to marry Norm so I could get into that convention!” Even so, she has never had any inclination to be a collector. “I need to travel light. I like to accumulate *information* for myself. The physical objects do not mean that much to me. They’re kind of — clutter.” The irony is that she says this while seated in the Nielsen living room. The walls are filled with every Chung Ling Soo poster you can imagine. Alexander and Adelaide Herrmann posters flank the front door. A signed photo of Max Malini



is nearby. And a large case displays the props of Senor Wences’ ventriloquial career. Yet she readily admits that these items are “beautiful; they’re gorgeous, and I do enjoy them. And there is the thrill of the hunt, as Norm says, in getting that next poster.”

Lupe says that Norm is now “completely retired,” partly because nowadays it has become more lucrative to stay at home and take care of their business than to travel and perform. And now that they are not traveling as much as they used to, Lupe decided she needed a hobby. About two years ago, she set about learning to make furniture. She wanted “to learn woodworking in a proper manner,” and she is studying and practicing the craft with the same diligence she has applied to all her other skills.

Lupe, now 46, still practices magic “once in a while, but not as much as I used to.” She feels magic “is driven by having a venue. You have to work in front of an audience. If

you’re not constantly working in front of an audience, it’s not magic anymore.” If people ask her to do some magic, she might do so once in a while as a challenge to herself, but she no longer solicits the work.

Her last performance was two and a half years ago, when she got a call from Panama asking if she could do a twenty-minute stage show for 1,000 people. “It took me three months to get ready for that,” she says, “but I pulled it off.”

She says, “I’m quite content being settled and doing more woodworking. I normally live in the present; I don’t think past two weeks at a time, as far as immediate goals.” Lupe cites an aphorism from the Shakers, a community known for high principles and fine furniture: “Do your work as though you had a thousand years to live and as if you were to die tomorrow.”

“That applies to everything,” Lupe adds. “You cannot take life for granted.” **M**