

The Houdini of the Hoi Polloi

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Health

David Blaine is browsing at a major auction house here, and he's got a problem. All sorts of magicians' memorabilia is going to be auctioned the next day, but he can't make it back. "I have a real problem," he explains apologetically to the woman at the front desk. "I want to bid on some of this stuff, but I'm going to be in a block of ice all day tomorrow, 12 to 18 hours."

She's unfazed. Perhaps she recognizes the 27-year-old as the street magician and performance artist who last year earned international fame when he emerged unscathed from a box that had been buried 6 feet beneath the ground for seven days. She doesn't let on. They work it out so a friend of Blaine's can bid in his place—the magician's heart is set on an array of Harry Houdini memorabilia, including a huge poster of the master escape artist, some news clippings and a letter to Houdini from another magician.

Houdini is an inspiration to the young magician. Indeed, it was Houdini's "Buried Alive" stunt—which the master never performed because he died first of a ruptured appendix—that Blaine re-created last year.

Outside the gallery, Blaine's tall figure cuts easily through the crowded sidewalks. Looking unassuming in a long-sleeved gray T-shirt, baggy black cargo pants and black athletic shoes, his melting-pot looks—his father was Puerto Rican and Italian, his mother a Russian Jew—blend easily into the crowd. As he walks, he holds a cell phone to his ear like a permanent accessory. Though he has an office uptown, Blaine does most of his business producing and directing his shows and stunts on the go.

Off the phone, he talks about his art: "Magic is the ability to take people out of their boring, problematic day and give them a moment where they completely forget about everything past and present, and leave them in a moment of astonishment," he says.

Those moments have been the subject of two ABC-TV specials featuring Blaine's street magic. ABC plans to air a third Nov. 29, which will culminate in Blaine's emerging from a block of ice after being enclosed inside for 72 hours.

A feast of contradictions, Blaine may be best known for his spectacle of entombment, but his reputation initially stemmed from performing card tricks on the streets before unsuspecting pickup audiences. And while he lives in an unpretentious three-room Greenwich Village apartment, he runs with an A-list crowd—Fiona Apple is a former girlfriend and Leonardo DiCaprio is a good friend.

On this day, he's letting a visitor tag along on a relatively normal, haphazard day—a day that mixes magic and everyday errands. Tomorrow, he'll be rehearsing for his ice stunt. His training for the feat has included taking frequent ice baths in a special tank at his gym and confining himself in ice blocks for increasing periods of time. He'll execute the ice event later this month in front of the ABC building at 44th Street and Broadway. Blaine says future stunts may include taking a bullet in the chest and doing “something” off the Brooklyn Bridge.

In order to survive, Blaine gets air and a minimal amount of water during the stunts—but no food. He says he doesn't suffer panic, boredom or even hunger: “You lose track of time, because you're delusional,” he says. “You don't sleep much, maybe one to two hours a night, because you're not active enough to be tired. Instead, ironically, you're restless.”

What carries him through is mental stamina. “The most important way to achieve any goal is to accept that you have the ability to endure what lies ahead from that point, enter willingly and openly. There's no reason to fear. Fear doesn't help.”

His documentary-style TV shows mostly feature him engaging people on a street or in a bar, and these effects can be just as astonishing as his endurance feats. Participants react with screams, curses and sometimes even tears. In one act, Blaine took a folded piece of paper from a woman on which she had written down the name of someone dear to her. He lit the paper on fire, tamped it out on his sleeve, then revealed the name she'd written—inscribed in charcoal on his own arm. In another, a woman signed her name on a playing card from a deck Blaine offered up. He then threw the cards in the air and an

instant later her card–signature and all–appeared inside the beer bottle she was drinking from. In his upcoming show, Blaine takes a baseball cap off a young boy on the street, reaches inside and pulls out a large snake. If it weren't for the reactions, you'd swear these people were set up.

“For me it's more about the people than the effect,” says Blaine, who calls his brand of magic “intimate,” because he usually works one-on-one. “My favorite part is when I connect. If there's no connection, there's no magic.”

In his work, Blaine is the antithesis of Las Vegas-style magicians such as David Copperfield or Siegfried and Roy. Blaine's style is low-key–no stage, no lights, no smoke, no curtains. For the most part, it's just him, a random audience and, occasionally, a pack of cards.

“David's a very innovative, excellent young magician and also a master of promotion, which is good for all magic,” says Tony Wilson, general manager of the Magic Castle, the famed Hollywood private club for magicians. “Like many great magicians who learned their art on the street, he deals with people quickly and always has a snappy comeback.”

Born David Blaine White in Brooklyn, he grew up without a father, and his mother supported him by working as a grade-school teacher, waitress and secretary. At 9, Blaine and his mother moved to Totowa, N.J., where she married and had a second son, with whom Blaine remains close. His mother died of ovarian cancer when he was 19.

As a boy, Blaine was “different,” recalls Jim Eisele, a friend since the fourth grade. Eisele remembers that soon after they met, Blaine showed him some tricks with balls and cards, but mostly he kept his magic to himself. “He was always very smart. He got good grades without applying himself and was always reading, though not necessarily books related to school.”

Eisele also says that even as a child Blaine showed special physical talent. “He had great balance and no fear of heights; he would walk on the ledges of bridges beside a 100-foot drop. He'd wear short sleeves in the freezing winter, and in the summer he could hold his breath longer in the pool than any of us, even when we'd cheat.”

At 18, Blaine moved back to New York and started performing magic throughout the city and later at A-list parties. Eventually, he began to get invited to Hollywood affairs, where he would display his magical talents to the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Madonna and Christopher Reeve. DiCaprio became a friend, and the actor hosted Blaine's first television special in May 1997.

Blaine became involved with singer-songwriter Apple after the 1998 Grammy Awards ceremony. "She was really down that night, and I did some magic for her, and it was a beautiful moment for both of us," he says. The relationship lasted about a year. His current girlfriend is a New York-based model, Josie Maran, but as for anything long term, he says, "I'm just taking it a day at a time."

Blaine says he comes to Los Angeles 10 to 12 times a year to work on deals or to attend parties. "Los Angeles is where I go to get treated the way life should treat you," he says. "In L.A. it's warm and beautiful and the weather's always appropriate. You get to drive all the time and stay in nice places. People have houses. There are trees. It's the way things should be."

Blaine's Manhattan apartment displays a bachelor's knack for disarray, despite the efforts of a housekeeper who's just left. Papers, CDs and books are strewn throughout. In the living room a table is covered with candles and photos, among them one of Blaine, at about age 4, walking through fall leaves with his mother.

On the ceiling of his home office is a 7-by-9-foot poster promoting Houdini's "Buried Alive" stunt, a lithograph identical to the one Blaine eyed at the auction house. On the wall over his desk hangs a smaller likeness of the same act, this one with Blaine's name and image replacing Houdini's.

On the same day that he committed to paying thousands of dollars for Houdini memorabilia (he later revealed that he got the poster for \$10,000 and the letter for \$2,000), Blaine walked into a small shop and balked at the \$3 price on a pack of playing cards. The moment is a clear metaphor for the contradictions that make up his life. Frugal and extravagant by turns, he is attempting to walk a delicate line between his new, fast-paced life and his old habits. And while his bearing is nonchalant, even lackadaisical, it quickly becomes clear that there's a lot more inside him than first appears.

Blaine speaks slowly and in a low voice, his eyes rarely opening completely. Extremely focused on his business and his art, he nevertheless has a tendency to speak in broad philosophical terms. One minute he'll quote Albert Einstein: "Mystery is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science." Then he'll tell you how many viewable stars are in the universe (10 to the 23rd power), and how that number compares with the odds of shuffling a deck of cards into new deck order. (Fewer stars, higher odds.)

His powers of concentration are so intense he can—or so it appears—change the hands on a man's watch without touching it, or pull off a card trick so amazing its spell will linger for days.

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Out on the streets again, Blaine heads to an editing studio for a session he's moved back three times. On the way, he concedes to showing his visitor a few tricks. "I'm not a trained seal," he says, referring to his reluctance to do command performances. "I have to feel like it."

He asks for the pack of cards he bought earlier, which I've been carrying, presumably so he couldn't switch them. The cellophane wrap is still on. I open it. He shuffles and hands them back, asks me to cut the deck and look at the card in the cut and close the deck. "Now think of your card," he says, then he locks his eyes on me. "King of spades."

He's right.

I look puzzled. "That's just being good with cards," he says. "I can look at a pile of cards and tell you how many are there."

I split the deck again and show him part of the deck. "Thirty-one," he says.

I count. Right again. Still, that doesn't explain how he knew my card.

"It's all mental," he says, shuffling the deck again. Next he fans the deck in front of me so I can see it's still a normal deck. He hands me the deck and asks me to think of a card, any card. For no reason, I think of the two of hearts. I'm still holding the deck.

“Turn over the top card,” he says. It’s my card.

He talks about something called mentalism, a mix of intuition and psychology. “Some people you can read; some you can’t.” Whatever. It’s weird.

Then it gets weirder.

Still holding the cards, I deal them one at a time, face down, onto Blaine’s palm, stopping when I want to. The last card I give him is the jack of diamonds, which we agree will be my card. He puts the jack on his palm and gives me the rest of the deck. We’re standing beside a large glass window of an empty storefront. He holds up his hand to the glass. As I stand watching, no more than a foot away, the card appears to shoot through the double-layered window, then stick-facing us—to the opposite side of the glass.

When I find my voice, I ask, “How?”

“If I told you how a plane could fly, how 11,000 tons of steel could stay suspended in the air, I could tell you almost anything and you’d believe me. I’ll just tell you it’s all very simple.”

Moments later, as we cross the street for some coffee, I look back at the window to see if what happened was just an illusion. “Look,” I say, ‘the card’s still there.’”

He shrugs. “It will probably be there for a long time,” he says, then smiles at the connection.