



Anthony Darkstone Brook In Conversation With Vinny Grosso

One of the great things about The Society of American Magicians' Conventions are the Close-Up & Stage contests. For well over a decade they have been superbly run by Paul Critelli. I know this from first hand experience. Together with Jon Racherbaumer, Scott Wells, Ron Jefferies and Bruce Trigg, I was a Close-Up Judge in New Orleans back in 2001.

Commitments kept me from attending another S.A.M convention until 2007 in Dallas, Texas. Apart from Hosting & Producing two session shows, I was together with "Ice" McDonald, Rod Chow and a few other notables on the panel of Stage Contest judges. Ably assisting Paul was an extremely professional, well-organized and highly efficient magician in his early thirties. That magician's name was Vinny Grosso. In July 2011, he will be the next President of The Society of American Magicians.

Vinny and I kept in touch and I was delighted to spend time with him and several other good friends at the S.A.M National Council meeting in Colorado Springs, Colorado in November 2010.

The S.A.M Presidents seem to have a cool way of achieving their objectives. In my recent article on M.I. Mark Weidhaas, I wrote that he seemed to bend time and thus create 30 hour days. Vinny seems to be able to bend space and be in several places at once. No sooner has he finished something in New York, he pops up in Italy and then what seems like mere seconds in Japan. He likely to set a world record if he is home for more than 7 days at a time.

A charming personality. An agile brain. A rising entrepreneur. A cool Magician. To use the vernacular - He rocks!!

ADB: Hello Vinny, thanks for taking the time out of your busy schedule to chat.

VG: My pleasure Tony. Always nice to chill out for a while and chat about Magic.

ADB: That's for sure. Vinny, you have a degree in Mechanical Engineering, you are an entrepreneur, you act as Tour Manager to various Variety Acts, a Videographer and a Speaker to name but a few of the myriad of things you are involved in. Share some of the details on these with us ...

VG: Well, Tony I was told that if you do something you love you'll never work a day in your life. Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on how you look at it, I love a lot of things. When I was younger I really thought I was going to be the next Lance Burton. I realized in college that was not going to happen. I also realized a few things I wasn't comfortable with if I pursued a career as a full time magician. The first being if I wasn't working I wasn't making any money. The second is that you may have to take a show you really don't enjoy doing because you need to pay the bills. Magic is my true passion and I never want it to seem like a job. I am in a fortunate position because I perform quite a bit but have the ability to pick and choose the shows I do. I took a job as an engineer after college, quickly moved into marketing and then started my own business five years ago. Having my own business gives

me the flexibility to travel, be involved with the magic community and continue performing. With today's technology it is possible to keep a business rolling while jet setting. It also helps to have a supportive business partner. The tour managing happened by chance. A good friend of mine is a very successful producer and promoter. He handles a variety of shows and was in a pinch one time for a tour manager. He was talking to me about it and I told him I could do it. I really enjoyed it and now fill in gaps for him regularly. I'll almost always combine activities on these trips. Like this January while tour managing for improv artists Colin Mochrie and Brad Sherwood I was able to meet with past S.A.M. President Michael Douglass, Contest Chair Paul Critelli and discuss different projects as well as catch a day of MagiFest.

ADB: That's a most impressive number of activities that you are involved in... and why not? I always say do everything you can whenever you can ... you lead a busy life and soon it's going to get even busier after you are sworn in as President of The Society of American Magicians. Who are you going to ask to swear you in? and what kinds of things are you most looking forward to ..

VG: I haven't asked him yet, but past president Jay Gorham is the reason I joined the S.A.M. There's a fun story there that I plan on sharing in my first president's column of M-U-M. I would love it if he were the one to swear me in. About becoming president, the closer it gets, the more excited I am. This may sound weird but as it approaches I am beginning to question if it's really happening. When I was elected 2nd Vice President I knew I would eventually become president but it was so far out I didn't really think about it. I was just concerned with what I needed to do as a part of the staff. I think we have a really good thing going and I am looking forward to keeping things moving in the right direction.

ADB: The upcoming S.A.M Convention is very special because of the North American Contests of Magic. At our National Council meeting a few months ago in Colorado, Brad Jacobs told us some of the exciting things that will link this S.A.M contests to the upcoming FISM in Blackpool in 2012. You are the Contests Associate Producer and you have been literally involved every aspect of the running of the S.A.M contests elaborate on some of the Contest happenings scheduled for Pittsburgh ...

VG: As you know Tony, both as the father of a previous contestant and a S.A.M judge on two occasions, the S.A.M contests are unique in so much that contestants are judged to a standard and not against each other. The FISM North American Championships adds an interesting dynamic to that. The folks you mentioned, Brad Jacobs and Paul Critelli along with others have been working hard to have the two work together. I think everyone at the convention will be happy with the results.

ADB: Before you go any further with details share with us some of the history of The S.A.M contests and some of the people who helped create the standard over the recent past decades.

VG: Well, as you know Tony we are all very proud of the great history of The S.A.M and the wonderful names that have been our President over the years. The contests are an integral part of that rich history. Here's a brief time capsule version. The contest has attained the status of a world class artistic event thanks to the pioneering efforts of past president Father Cyprian Murray. More than 25 years ago, Father Cyp, as he is more commonly known, developed scoring criteria that combined both the objectivity of a mathematical system and the insight that is only available to people who have seen decades of our art and have a way to convey that wisdom to others. It has been hailed by performers, creators, historians, and enthusiasts as an unbiased and apolitical experience, Father Cyprian's gift to the magic community has been an inspiration and incentive to hundreds of Magicians. Paul Critelli took over chairing the contest about 20 years ago and has ensured that the spirit of the contest remains intact. You will notice that it is always referred to as a contest, not a competition. The goal is to showcase talent and encourage them to be the best they can be, not to beat the other act. It is very much a positive and family like atmosphere for all those involved and it's constantly evolving. A couple of years ago we had a judge, Steve Marshall, participate from

Japan via SKYPE. Last year Mike Miller introduced the President's Award. This is an award where the contestants vote to select a fellow contestant who best exemplifies the camaraderie expected of the contestants. The contest is such a great experience for all those involved because it brings together so many folks from such diverse backgrounds with the common love of the art of magic.

ADB: Let me take you back to some of the events and indeed Contest happenings for 2011. Please share some of the details

VG: So how are we going to merge the S.A.M. Contest with a FISM formatted North American Championships of Magic? Simple, we'll have both. There will be 6 contest shows from Wednesday through Friday. All of the contestants will present their acts and the judging will be done in FISM style by judges with FISM experience. There will be three stage categories and three close-up categories. The top three scoring contestants in each stage category and top two in each close-up category, provided they meet the minimum score requirement, will gain entrance into FISM 2012 in Blackpool. FISM is waiving the contest entrance fee. The top performers with representatives from each category will have a chance to contend for the title North American Champion of Magic. There will be a second round of performance and judging for these contestants on Friday night. In addition to the NACM prize, S.A.M. Prizes such as gold and silver medals, people's choice, etc. will be in play. S.A.M. contest rules and style will govern this round with the highest scoring stage contestant and highest scoring close-up contestant named North American Champion of Magic. As an extra incentive, the two NACMs will have FISM registration paid for too!

ADB: That is most certainly a lot to look forward to. I know that our Dean George Schindler has been doing a great PR job. Obviously, you are personally looking forward to July 2011. I know you have already been quite busy with re-vamping the Brand Management of The S.A.M. . You are looking at making some interesting changes to the Marketing strategies . Share some of your present and future plans with us ...

VG: The S.A.M. is the oldest magic organization in the world. While we are very proud of that, we don't want to act old. This started a couple of years ago when we were the first magic organization to introduce a digital version of our magazine. You will see even more changes this year, next year and years to come. Our image must convey our rich history while expressing our ability to innovate and be current. We're in the process of a makeover not only with tools and programs we offer our membership but the way in which we deliver them. It's a process that spans over many presidents' terms, so for it to be successful working together is imperative. Luckily we all do.

ADB: That is going to be just wonderful. I for one can't wait to see all the new ideas and changes that are due to be implemented. That's the exciting future. I'd like to turn now to the past . How did you start in Magic? Did you have any one person who influenced you or did you learn your Magic from various sources ?

VG: I think I have a pretty generic story, I was always interested in magic but then discovered a magic shop at the age of twelve. I bought everything I could and was then hooked for life. I received a lot of help along the way, from three people in particular. After buying my share of gimmicked props and Svengali decks from the magic shop I thought I knew how this magic stuff was done. Encouraging my interest in this new activity my parents took me to a restaurant they heard had a magician. There I met Mike Stillwell from San Diego. I saw him do amazing things with cards that my Svengali deck could not do. I approached him later, "letting him know I was a magician" and then asked him what kind of deck he used. He told me "bicycle" and then introduced me to sleight of hand and The Royal Road to Card Magic. Jay Gorham was also of huge influence having me over his house and use his library, work on effects and borrow props. He helped me prepare an act for a televised talent show when I was sixteen. With his help I was the only magic act accepted and I was then able to meet the emcee of the show, magician Jim Snack.

Jim worked with me for a day on my act and did not change one effect. He simplified my props and movements. Taught me how to greet and interact with the audience. It was my first exposure to stage direction.

ADB: As you know Vinny, I am known for my views on the performance & presentation of Magic. Much of my written work has reflected those views. My performances most certainly. I practice what I preach. You and I have had a few conversations on this topic in the past. What are your views on the performance & presentation of Magic ?

ADG: My biggest pet peeve with magicians is when they do someone else's act. I don't mean the blatant copying which hopefully we all know is wrong. I am talking about an effect they buy and have the right to perform. Too often I see them performing it as the creator of the effect does, not within their own persona or character. It really confuses an audience when they see a magician do a comedy routine, often verbatim, from Harry Anderson followed by a mentalism routine as if they were Max Maven. I'm not saying you can't mix effects but you can't mix characters, unless, maybe, if your character is a crazed person suffering from multiple personality syndrome. Nope, I take that back, you really should not try and mix characters. It can be tough because a lot of times we see an effect we love and want to do and it is difficult to be honest with ourselves to say this just doesn't fit.

ADB: For some time now you have been a key figure in The S.A.M Veterans program. For those of us not familiar with that aspect of your work in The S.A.M tell us about that and the shows you organize ...

VG: That was the first job I had in the S.A.M. It is a wonderful program and makes you proud to be a part of the organization. Essentially, it provides entertainment to veterans. S.A.M. members around the country volunteer to put on shows primarily but not limited to VA hospitals. We have a guide book that helps our members who have the initiative to setup shows in their area, we also give members a specially designed lapel pin for volunteering. If you ask any magician that has volunteered I will guarantee they'll tell you they get more out of it than what they put in.

ADB: You have also volunteered and have done shows for US Military personnel stationed overseas. The logistics of that must be quite overwhelming. Share some of your experiences on that ...

VG: I did two tours through Armed Forces Entertainment. They were great! Having your travel schedule dictated by the Pentagon is not for everyone. You do a lot of hurrying up to wait. You also have to go with the flow. I was in Guantanamo Bay getting ready to go to Ecuador when I got the message that the Ecuadorians overthrew their government and my show scheduled at the embassy was obviously canceled. So the next few days were spent in a hotel in Jacksonville before going on to the next stop. The experiences were great and if you can do it, I'd highly recommend it. It is a bit weird though, you go to places because you want to thank the troops for their service and sacrifice and they end up constantly saying thank you to you. I think the shows are secondary to the time you spend just hanging out with the troops.

ADB: I know that you are a great believer in teamwork in both your Magic life and business life. Share with us some of your philosophy on the importance of teamwork, and in particular, how you see that concept being applied during your Presidency.

VG: Mike Miller, a recent past president, used teamwork as his theme for the year. We even went out and bought S.A.M. baseball jerseys for the convention to show we were all part of the team. I think it's a wonderful theme because in order for real progress to be made in this organization we have to work together. It can be very easy to get caught up in the whole presidency thing, I mean in July I will be holding the same position Harry Houdini held. To quote past president Andy Dallas, "how cool is that?" but I really like National Secretary, Marlene Clark's favorite line "remember, it's a magic club." With any organization, politics

play a role. The S.A.M. has a great bunch of folks who are grounded, committed to working together and will always think of the organization first. By the way, if someone wants a S.A.M. jersey you can still get them from our gifts and insignia store.

ADB: You tour manage, you Produce shows but you also perform. What kind of magic do you mainly perform?

VG: I do mostly parlor and stage magic primarily for corporate audiences. I only work adult audiences but I don't do anything off color, we'll except for a few times in the burlesque show I work, but hey it's a burlesque show. There are a couple resorts I still work near my home over the summers in upstate New York mostly to fine tune material. I have been working on a new show with a very unique approach that fits my persona perfectly. I have been proofing segments of it at the resorts and the response has been great. I'll have it all together soon and will actively market it after my term as president.

ADB: You have spoken about Magic being an asset in your business career . How have you merged the two?

VG: It has been an asset, even in college. My senior design project for my mechanical engineering degree was a levitation, disguised as a park bench. After college, working a "regular" job as an engineer and then in marketing as a product manager, I was invited to meetings and conferences that I would not have been if it weren't for magic. I would provide entertainment but at the same time I had an opportunity to be involved in these meetings and demonstrate my business skills. With my own business it is certainly a conversation starter and a distinguishing factor that clients don't easily forget.

TB: How do you see the future of Magic evolving? Not just in the US and Canada but in many of the places you have visited.

ADG: Great question...difficult question! With technology I think the social and learning aspects of magic will be ever changing with what's available. Performance mediums will certainly evolve but not as quickly. I think there will always be a desire to see magic live and in person but there are already people like Marco Tempest and Cyril Takayama who are having success with magic and new media. It will be very interesting to see how it develops over the years.

TB: In my introduction I made reference to your travel schedule. You are always on the move. This because of the various activities that you are involved in; always interesting for others to know how you manage the logistics of all that ...

ADG: Well Tony, with the exception of my trips to Italy, it is always tied to some sort of work. The key is that I am in control of my travel. I don't have a corporate travel agent making up my travel arrangements. I have spots I have to be in at certain times, I then look to see what else I can do or who else I can see around that and then plan my trip accordingly.

ADB: Without revealing too many plans can you tell us some of the major happenings you are working towards between July 2011 and July 2012.

VG: Yes, it's difficult to talk specifics about what we're going to do because as you know things have way of changing. I will say our focus is providing new and unique benefits to our membership that will ensure the relevance of the S.A.M. into the future. And by the way they will be very cool!

ADB: I, and indeed all of us at The S.A.M look forward to all of that ... Thank you Vinny. All of us wish you great success & lots of happiness in your upcoming Presidential year.

VG: Thank you Tony. I look forward to hanging out together again real soon.

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