

The Gloves are Off

One of Goodman's favorite stories is his encounter with Muhammad Ali, whom he met by chance at an airport terminal in North Carolina. The boxing great was sitting down, waiting for his flight, his head bowed.

"I [remembered] that Muhammad Ali loves magic. He does magic. So I go over to Ali, and I introduced myself as a professional musician. He looks up with a big smile and says, 'Show me something.'

"So I ask him for a dollar bill. I take his dollar, and he's watching me very closely. Right before his eyes, I turn that bill into a hundred-dollar bill. He stood up, and was amazed, and he reached into his pocket and took out a little red scarf. He went, 'whoosh,' and it disappeared. And he's looking at me, and I'm like, 'Well done, Muhammad Ali!' And the next thing you know, crowds of people gather.

"If I didn't know that he was a magician, I would have been very shy and awkward. He did not look approachable. But because I knew we had this connection with magic, that helped create that moment."

Goodman levitates his assistant, Leah Sessa.



Gary Goodman

FOR THE LONGTIME ILLUSIONIST, EVERY LITTLE THING HE DOES IS MAGIC.

Like a mime, magician Gary Goodman is pretending to shuffle a deck of cards. He fans his invisible deck and asks me to pick a card, any card. I pretend to pick one, look at it, memorize it. In my head, it's the 5 of diamonds. He tells me to "put it back in the deck." I comply. He asks me if I picked an ace or a joker; I tell him I didn't. That still leaves 48 possibilities.

Then Goodman takes a real deck out of its box and begins to fan it in front of me, telling me that only one card—my card—will be facing down, while all the others will face up. Sure enough, I can see the backside of one card. He flips it over. It's the 5 of diamonds.

I'm flummoxed. I have no idea how he did it. "I tell everybody that any 8-year-old with 40 years' experience can do this," says Goodman, 55. "If I told you [how I did it], I'd have to make you disappear."

Lord knows he could. We're in Gary Goodman's home in Boca Raton, an immaculate, white living room decorated with posters of his profession's godlike figures: Alexander Conlin, Howard Thurston, Harry Kellar and Harry Houdini, whose illusions continue to haunt and inspire Goodman's act, which he performs at public events and private gatherings across South Florida and beyond. He's played at the halftimes of Miami Heat games, Halloween shows at Sugar Sand Park, and at least a decade entertaining attendees of Chris Evert's Pro-Celebrity Tennis Classic in Delray Beach.

The trick he performed for me is a combination of close-up magic and mentalism, which is the art of mind-reading. As Goodman puts it, "I

influence people's thoughts, get them to say a certain thing, get them to think a certain way."

But he's perhaps most known for his grand illusions, whose props are so large and plentiful they no longer fit in his home. He has a repertoire of 20 that he's perfected over the years, and most of them involve slicing sharp objects through beautiful assistants trapped in baskets or boxes; shortening a beautiful assistant in a cabinet until she's nothing but a head and a pair of feet; making beautiful assistants disappear and reappear; and changing places with beautiful assistants, despite being padlocked in a trunk (the latter is an old Houdini trick that still amazes).

"No trick or illusion is airtight," he says. "Every time I do a grand illusion, there's an element of danger. So my mind is so focused, because I can't let that illusion fall off the stage. Every night is a new venue, so you can't just assume the floor will be just right for it, or the angles will be just right for it. And when you do these things long enough, you get a feel for the backup plan: If this happens, then I'll do this. There are moments when you just have to say, 'Let's pause a moment for the trick that just died.' Fortunately, that's very, very rare."

And Goodman has been doing this a long time. He was catapulted into showbiz at a young age; his father played in an orchestra and owned a music store, and his mother was a singer, and they encouraged his early interest in magic. By age 12, he had enough material to perform in his Niagara Falls garage for two hours, charging neighborhood kids a dime to see him.

Then, through a magician hired to play his

birthday party, Goodman met Colonel Gene Alcorn, a recluse who had built illusions for Houdini. Alcorn, still active in his 80s, agreed to let the adolescent Gary shadow him while he worked. By age 14, Goodman could pull off grand illusions.

"I really jumped up the ladder because of that," Goodman recalls. "When you're an illusionist, you can work for thousands. Now you're working with lady assistants, with lighting, with curtains, with sound, and the music's got to be right, and it's all got to come together for the grand illusion to really look great."

Goodman's career has led him into some of South Florida's most luxurious homes and events. He's performed for Celine Dion at a private party, played to Nick Nolte at a bar mitzvah, and helped Miami Beach restaurateur Shareef Malnik saw his girlfriend, "Burn Notice" star Gabrielle Anwar, in half for charity. He made his acting debut in 2011's "Jack and Jill," in which he did the saw-in-half illusion to Adam Sandler on a cruise ship, and he's even played at the Tower of London, for the queen's guards.

"Magic has helped open up a lot of doors," he says. "I've been to every hotel and country club in South Florida, rooms no one has ever been in. I'm never around people that are in a bad mood, because I see them at the anniversary, the birthday, the holiday party."

"When you're doing strolling magic, you do come across people that don't look very happy, and sometimes I purposefully go up to them, because in my mind, I want to make them smile and laugh. It's all about knowing how to make it fun for the audience."