JOHN BULLEID

Behind the Screams

As a successful actor, magician and illusion creator, John Bulleid has the job we'd all love to have! Currently working on new West End show 'When Darkness Falls' he's in his element creating moments of magic to give audiences an experience they'll never forget! Magicseen chats with the brilliant John Bulleid.

Tell us about 'When Darkness Falls' – and how did you become involved in the show? "When Darkness Falls is a brilliantly written series of ghost stories, all based on true stories from Guernsey," says John. "I was drawn in by the ambiguous nature of the setting and the questions it poses around guilt, loss, regret and ambition. I was approached by one of the producers, Chris Wheeler, about it. We first met at youth theatre when we were both teenagers – and so it became something of a no brainer for me. A fantastic script with plenty of moments I could add magical value to, a producer who understood and appreciates my process and effects, and a creative team all pushing to make an exciting and engaging new piece of theatre!"

What illusions did you provide? And what were the major difficulties you had to overcome? "At the moment the illusions are mainly based around appearances, vanishes and making objects move around the space," continues John. "We are early in the rehearsal process so I'm sure more will be added as we go through to opening night. The hardest thing about this piece is making sure the methods are bulletproof, as it will tour to different venues with different sight lines – so I need to make sure what we create can be picked up and put into other theatres at short notice with minimal set up time. I also need to make sure my effects don't require a huge amount of space in the transport for the set – so lots of pack flat/play big, as well as effects being built into the set…"

I ask about who actually gives the final approval on his illusions and how does he present his idea initially? "Everything about my approach involves collaboration across all departments. There are moments in the script already described (eg a ghost appears) and there will also be moments the director discovers through rehearsal. Alongside this I will also suggest ideas and concepts for effects I have from reading through the script or watching a rehearsal. These can be illusions used to heighten the narrative



When Darkness Falls, Alex Phelps & Will Barton. Photo Michael Wharley





at a certain moment, or to aid in a scene change using a magic principle.

"Initially I discuss the script with the director and get a deep understanding of their vision for the piece. I then go about creating methods to help realise their ideas whilst also adding in anything else I have thought of. Once we have agreed on what we want to happen I then begin working with all other departments to bring the illusions to the stage. I also then approach prop builders to create anything we need. The aim is to then have prototypes ready for day one of rehearsals that can then be used in the room and developed for the next stage."



Performing for Sir Ian McKellen.

John tells me that normally he aims to be there through the previews of the show to 'show lock' – which means creatively they can't add anymore to the show. "It allows me to listen to audience reactions to the effects and tweak them as necessary. I am also then around to rehearse the cast including the understudies to make sure they are all up to show standard with the effects. Once we get past press night, I like to pop in to see the show throughout the run – and I am also 'on call' for the resident director if they feel an illusion isn't quite landing anymore. We also get show reports after every show and if an effect is repeatedly misbehaving (for example, a line snapping) I will go in to fix it!"

Are there many illusion-specialists who work in theatre? Obviously, there's magicseen cover star Paul Kieve – have you worked with him before? "I regularly collaborate with Jamie Harrison and Chris Fisher – we work across multiple projects together and always message each other ideas and concepts to see if we have missed anything. I am yet to work with Paul – and would love to. His approach to magic in the theatre, certainly in the UK, really showed what was possible. It is such an exciting time to be working in this way, as there is a real thirst for illusion within a theatre setting."

John is just about to start rehearsals for 'The Magician's Elephant' for The Royal Shakespeare Company. "It's a dream come true as I have wanted to work with them since I was a boy. Without giving too much away, the main illusion involves the elephant. To be creating an illusion of this scale on the main stage for such a prestigious company is genuinely incredible and I count myself very fortunate."

What are the difficulties you face as the entertainment industry comes back to life? "As lockdown has lifted in the UK we are now able to get audiences back in to theatres, meaning everyone wants to get shows open. So this means a lot of diary management to give enough time to the existing shows I have helped create, as well as having time to rehearse new pieces. On top of that close-up work is beginning to return – and after over a year of not working it is very welcome.

With multiple skills – actor, magician, illusion creator – I ask John if commitments with one of these ever meant he missed a great project in another area? Says John, "I've been very fortunate so far in my career that I've been able to do my favourite things since I went pro as a magician at 18. I then trained as an actor in London and graduated in 2005. This led to me appearing in plays around the UK and abroad as well as short films and commercials. All the way through this my close-up magic career was developing and proving to be profitable - meaning I could choose acting projects I had an interest in rather than taking projects based purely on finances."

John's illusion creation for theatre started in 2011/2012 when he was asked to play The White Rabbit. They wanted an actor/magician for the role and so he had to show magic in the audition. The director felt he was too tall for what they wanted – but the magic was better than any they had seen. "They then approached me to design and teach the magic to the cast. My ambition has always been to create theatre and tell stories and whilst there have been projects in the past I would have loved to work on, I regularly pinch myself when I walk in to see a show I've helped create – to hear the audience of a packed theatre gasp at a moment you created, and know that happens night after night, is an incredible feeling."



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At what stage of your career did you get into magic? "Like most magicians I started learning when I was a boy – and was given my first magic set when I was seven. My folks said that I was always doing puppet shows, or making up stories for them when I was younger so they wanted to give me something to perform with.

"As I got older and got really in to acting the magic kept growing alongside. I find it fascinating as a performer I can delight an audience as much with a deck of cards as I can with a speech by Shakespeare! Then jump forward to my final years at school I had decided I wanted to head to an acting college to train as a professional actor. Again my folks stepped in and pointed out how hard a career in acting can be, and suggested I also started doing magic professionally.

"When I was 17 I worked for a year in a local restaurant every Monday table- hopping, and then got my first professional magic residency at 18 in my home town of Watford. As I went through acting college my close-up career developed to include corporate functions as well as weddings and private parties. I quickly realised the understanding of the performance-side of magic I gained from

QUICKIES WITH JOHN...

What was the last effect you bought?
I've just picked up Tom Elderfields new book on creating magic – and a few Calen Morelli downloads.

Last book you read?
I've just finished 'Gotta get Theroux this' – by Louis Theroux (he's a British documentary maker). I'm also working my way through 'Amoralman' by Derek DelGuadio and 'Hiding The Elephant' by Jim Steinmeyer.

Favourite effect you perform?
For close up I love doing 'Haunted 2.0' by Peter Eggink – it's such a clean haunted deck and gets fantastic reactions.

my knowledge of acting and it helped me stand out from other magicians. I fully embraced this, and it allowed me to start creating effects for companies at trade shows that were tied to their key messages or ideas."

It sounds like a great combination for a career, but is there's one specific area you'd like to do more of? "I have a burning desire to embed magic in to narrative so it becomes more than just a 'trick' – it is the only way to express that moment of a story. So the area I really want to do more of is creating shows for myself to perform – taking the knowledge I have gained and developed as an illusion designer and truly combining it with my love for acting. The 'In and Of Itself' piece by Derek DelGuadio was stunning – and highlighted the strength of storytelling. It would be thrilling to develop something similar in the UK..."

Who has been the one person in your life who has inspired you the most? "My Wife is incredible and always encourages me to push myself further than I thought I could. Without her support and love I would not be working in the way I am – nor would I have achieved the things I have, and we are both aware there is more to come. She is a brilliant sounding board for my crazy ideas and concepts, as well as being full of fascinating observations about magic and theatre. To have someone I totally trust, that is willing to listen to me work out how to pull of the impossible, and also not scared to say when something doesn't sound right – is truly inspiring.

"I must also mention my three incredible children – their innocent questions about what I do tend to make me think about moments in new ways, and their undiluted wonder at magic is stunning to see. Honourable mentions have to go to my folks and little Brother who were instrumental in getting me in to magic and the theatre – and always there to support me in any way they can. I must also mention my grandfather who was a stage manager many years ago. He had model theatres in his house we would play with and we would regularly talk about how theatres work on a mechanical level."

I ask John which theatre production has wowed him the most for its illusions? "There have been a few!" exclaims John. "Harry Potter and The Cursed Child really opened my eyes to what is possible in a theatre. I saw the show before I joined the illusion department so had the joy of seeing it as a lay person, prior to learning all about the methods. I also loved 'Horror' by the Jakop Ahlbom Company. It had some incredible illusion work in there which enabled the audience to be totally sucked into the dark world on stage. And 'Ghost Stories' by Andy Nyman and Jeremy Dyson - the way they created the entire show as one big trick, and also used magic principles throughout was such a joy to see..."



***WHEN DARKNESS FALLS OPENS AT THE PARK THEATRE, LONDON FROM WEDNESDAY 18 AUGUST 2021, FOLLOWED BY A UK TOUR.**
Website: whendarknessfalls.co.uk
Box Office: 020 7870 6876.
Telephone booking fee applies.
Website: www.parktheatre.co.uk

NEWS

JEFF STEVENSON WRITES



It's been an amazing three days back on the high seas on the lovely Regal Princess. To be back doing the job I love on a cruise after 16 months off makes me appreciate even more the lifestyle I had before April last year. The old me has returned and I can only thank my wife, son and family for keeping me going through the time off at home and I will be for ever grateful to them, I know I have not been the easiest of company some times as I felt that the lockdowns and restrictions would last for ever. We were lucky, my heart goes out to those who lost loved ones and friends due to the pandemic. I lost a few good mates and so I will always look back on the lockdown as a sad time.

CHARLIE FRYE



Some things never change. Pre-show warm up.