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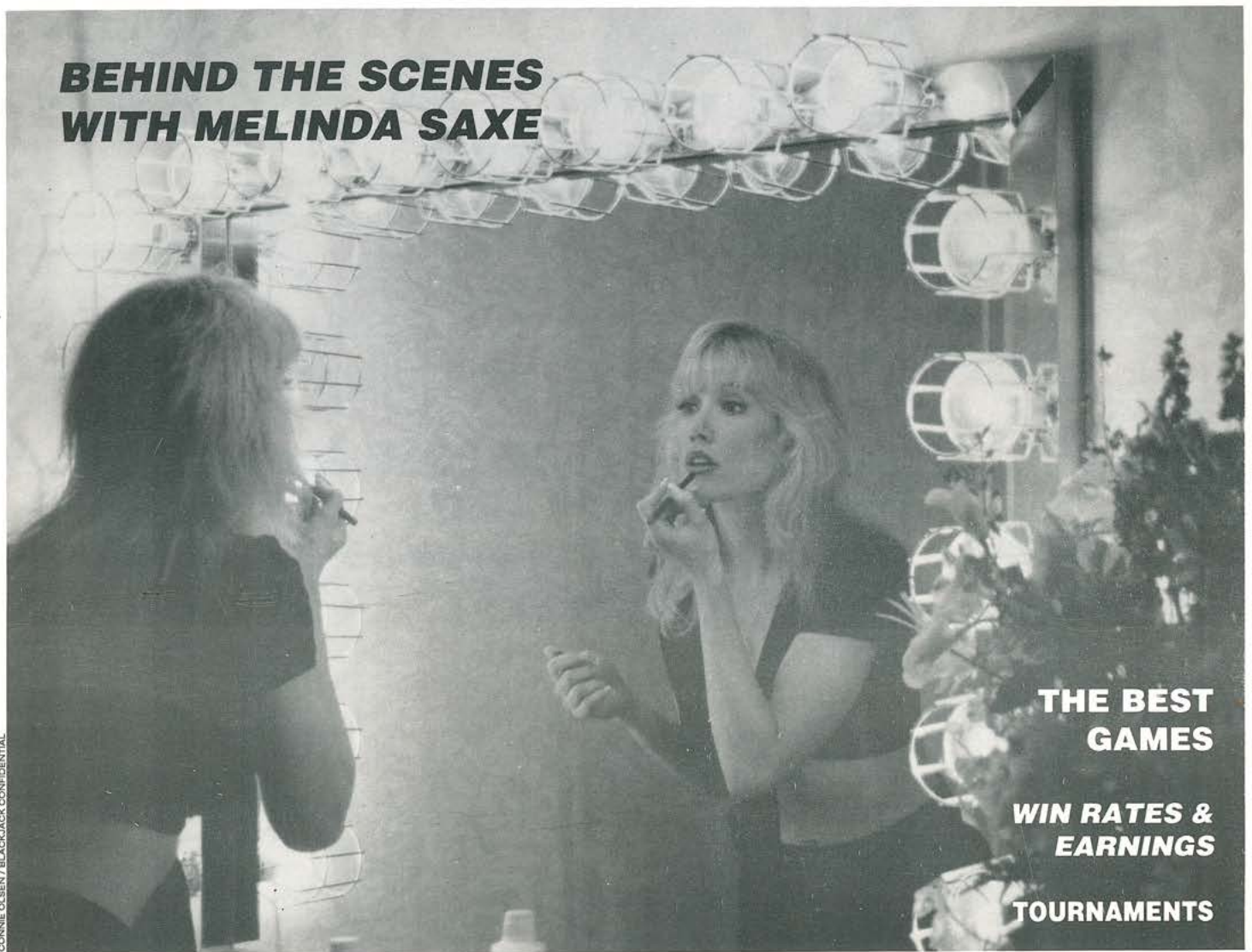
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**BEHIND THE SCENES  
WITH MELINDA SAXE**



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# Magical Melinda

'The First Lady of Magic' debuts at the Taj Mahal in Atlantic City

By Connie Olsen  
BLACKJACK CONFIDENTIAL

After finishing a two-month engagement at Caesars Lake Tahoe in Stateline, Nev., Melinda Saxe had a few days for relaxation before opening a two-month show at the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort in Atlantic City. Her flight was rough. The thunderstorms were scary, even for the First Lady of Magic.

Melinda decided to stop off at her home base in Ocala, Fla., before proceeding to New Jersey. "I love Florida," she said. "It's nicer than Vegas. I love Florida's humidity, the moisture ... [Las Vegas] is so dry."

Back home in Ocala, Saxe didn't have a lot of time to relax in the sun or do the usual Florida things, she recalled from her suite on the 14th floor of the Taj Mahal.

"Everything's been so tight with my schedule," she said. "Back-to-back business. It's been good in that respect."

A native of Morristown, Tenn., Saxe speaks in the wispy high-pitched voice of a little girl. She is effervescent and enthusiastic about what she does; thrilled that her show gives enjoyment to others. The 32-year-old woman is childlike and this is part of her appeal.

Saxe has performed magic in Las Vegas showrooms for 10 years. Last year, she was inducted into the Magic & Movie Hall of Fame and named Outstanding Magician of the Year. Her career is expanding. Recently, she did a segment on the Jay Leno show. She is booked at the Taj Mahal through Aug. 4, her first appearance in Atlantic City. If an Atlantic City property offered her a long-term contract, would she take it?

"Yes," Saxe replied.

■ ■ ■

Saxe lived in Tennessee until she was three. Her mother had been a dance teacher and her father was a musician.

Then, her family moved to Las Vegas.

"Both my parents worked in Vegas, that's where the show business bug bit me," Saxe said. "My mom was a dancer in the *Folies Bergere*. She worked with many celebrities including Jimmy Durante."

Melinda's father played the saxophone. Saxe on sax. He also played the clarinet, oboe and flute. Saxe was also a conductor for Frank Sinatra during his "rat pack" days at the Sands Hotel & Casino.

"I knew Sammy (Davis Jr.) really well," Melinda said. "He was a real sweetheart. Of course, I was just a kid, then."

After graduating from high school, Melinda studied music at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

"I played the piano, I really love the piano," she said. "I got an A. I did good."

So, what about a musical magician?

Melinda paused.

"Maybe I'll play the piano and make it float," she replied.

Before attending the University of Nevada, she was already into magic.

"I started studying magic seriously at age 16," she said. "I was reading books, going to magic conventions, working on my act and going to college, all at the same time."

But, why magic?

"No one in my family was involved in magic, I had no role model," Saxe said. "It happened by accident ... I had a dream that I was performing magic on stage. I was in my early teens. It seemed so real ... I was on stage with a black cape. I woke up and said, 'WOW, what a great idea!'"

Magic aside, Melinda said her first love is dancing, which she began doing at age 3. At age 17, her first job was as a dancer in the Siegfried & Roy show when it was at the Frontier Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas. She performed with the show for two years. "I was interested in magicians and wanted to be around that atmosphere," she said. "I saved my money [from the show] to go toward magic books."

Dancing is a big part of her 80-minute show at the Taj Mahal. It's been teamed with magic in an attempt to give the show high energy. There are moments, though, when the show could have used more magic and less dancing from the supporting cast. Even so, Melinda puts her heart and soul into each production number.

Saxe's Tarzan routine is a sensual dance, light on magic. She wears a loin cloth and bra-top, but it's done in good taste. In a disappearing horse act, she is seductive in a harem outfit. In all, there are 15 costume changes with the help of Alana Souza, her personal assistant. Alana is engaged to Melinda's brother, David, who is audio director. "He's been with me since the beginning of my career - a really big help."

Melinda is audience-friendly. She enjoys enticing men from the audience to participate. One volunteer even put his head inside a guillotine.

She challenges the audience from the beginning. "Don't take your eyes off me," she warned. In an instant, Melinda "vanished" and "reappeared" in the audience. It's a great illusion.

Saxe's hard work and persistence have paid off. In 1986, she became the first female magician to open in Las Vegas with a "little show" at the Bourbon Street Hotel Casino. Since the property had a small stage, Melinda was limited in her illusions.

"I did birds and flowers," she said.

Other magicians came to see her. They told Melinda that they were happy to see a woman in the field, she said.

After Bourbon Street, she played the former Landmark Hotel Casino. Her act grew. "I started incorporating a horse - shrinking a [regular-size] horse into a miniature horse," she said.

After the Landmark, Saxe played the former Marina for six months. Then, came the Sands where she added two horses, a lion and a tiger to her act. Melinda's show moved to the Sahara and later returned to the Sands. In 1995, she completed a three-year run at the Lady Luck Hotel Casino.

Working with animals can be dangerous. Melinda has had several close calls, working with a 500-pound tiger. There have also been humorous moments. Like the time a 400-pound lion named Napoleon sprayed the front row of an audience. Twelve shows a week is hard on the animals. "I felt bad for them, I never put them in dangerous situations," she said.

Still, she wanted Melinda to be THE attraction. This is why she removed the cats from her act at the Lady Luck. "I wanted to take my show from being a Vegas review with animals and make it a Broadway type of production," she said.

Instead of showcasing the animals,

Melinda started to intermix more with the audience. It was a major change because she wanted to create "more emotion and to let the people know who I am."

There are no big cats in her show at the Taj Mahal, but she does make *Cody* and *Louie* disappear. Cody is an 8-year-old palomino who wears white wings to resemble the mythical Greek horse, Pegasus. Louie is a 4-year-old French poodle who "lives for the show," Melinda said. "He gets depressed if he's not in the show," she giggled. "He's quite a ham."

Each night, in Melinda's dressing room, Louie greets Saxe and Steve Zadrick, who is general manager and executive producer of Worldwide Magic, Inc., with great affection. Some say Saxe and Zadrick are an item. Louie won't say. *Good doggie.*

People are curious about the illusions. When a spectator asks her how she does an illusion, she replies, "It's magic."

Saxe said she enjoys hearing people's ideas. Sometimes, following an illusion, she'll ask someone, "Did I not do it right?" Or, she'll ask someone if they think they know how the illusion was performed.

"Sometimes, they may be kind of close," Saxe conceded. "People are kind of like kids ... and like to believe the fantasy."

Magic is an art form, just like dancing, she said. "The more you practice, the cleaner it gets," Saxe said. "It takes hours and sometimes months of practice to make it come off clean ... an act may seem simple, but it takes a lot of work."

When she introduced the horse illusion for the first time, it was a success. People thought it was amazing, she said.

"You can have the greatest trick for an illusion and it can be a disappointment," she admitted. "You keep tweaking at it and it just doesn't go over and you have to take it out. It can cost you plenty. Magic is very expensive."

During a show, a magician has to be prepared for the unexpected.

"Maybe the spotlight just burns out, there's nothing you can do," Saxe said. "I've been in the audience watching David (Copperfield) when things go wrong ... I KNEW, but the audience didn't. You just try to make it the best that you can."

Saxe performs six nights a week at the Taj Mahal. She is also rehearsing new illusions. She is working on making a jet and sports car vanish. The illusions aren't ready for her act yet, but they are "really cool," she said. Simply getting the jet on stage is a lot of work, she added.

How will she get it inside the building?

"I don't worry about those things," she said. "I just say, 'Get it in, whatever you do.'"

The show now opens with Melinda on a motorcycle. When the jet illusion is perfected, it will replace the motorcycle, she said. The jet and sports car won't be added to the show for awhile, but Saxe

said she keeps changing the show to keep



SPECIAL TO BLACKJACK CONFIDENTIAL

her audience off balance.

"We want people coming back and we want them to see something different," Saxe said. "This is why we're always changing and making things better."

Melinda stands 5 feet, 6 inches tall and weighs 120 pounds. Part of Saxe's appeal is her Kewpie doll demeanor, even when fielding tough questions. At the Taj Mahal, for example, someone asked about her brief marriage to magician Lance Burton.

"It was an illusion," she quipped.

Saxe filmed a special for European television last year and is now working on a similar show for the U.S. There have been talks with Disney and CBS-TV for possible specials, according to her agent,

Doug Isaac of Premier Artists Services, Inc. If the special becomes a reality, Saxe has a menagerie in Ocala, including a black leopard, clouded leopard, Siberian tiger, cougar and female lion.

The clouded leopard is a different type of animal, very rare with a sweet and gentle temperament, Saxe said. She said she considers all of her animals "pets." The clouded leopard will "get up in your lap" if you let it, she added. The animals live in a compound and have a full-time caretaker.

With all of Melinda's casino performances, she said she has never played blackjack, and has lost no more than a couple of quarters in a slot machine. "I'm not much of a gambler," she confessed.