

NICK LEWIN CASH, GOO GOO CLUSTERS, & THE HOUSE OF CARDS.

Photos supplied by *House of Cards*
and Nick Lewin's personal photos

PART ONE

It is the 2019 Winter Carnival of Magic in Pigeon Forge. I was taking a short cut through the hotel parking lot to do my pre-show soundcheck at the theatre. I heard a cheery "Hi Nick" from a parking car, the gentleman parking the vehicle was Joey Martinez, who I remembered fondly from his days as Front Man De-Luxe at the Magic Castle. We caught up the next morning over breakfast, and Joey updated me, telling me that he was now the Director of Operations and Entertainment for the new House Of Cards magic restaurant in Nashville. The House Of Cards opened in April 2018, and about six months later Martinez joined the team. I mentioned to Joey that I would love to visit the club, we exchanged emails, and last week, I found myself performing at the club. Not all bookings go so smoothly and quickly, but this one did! I thought it would be fun to write my story this month about how the Nashville gig went from a road warrior's viewpoint.

I have to mention this was an engagement that I really wanted to do. Not only had I heard many good things about the House Of Cards, but I only ever need a tiny excuse to visit Nashville. Nashville is unquestionably still the beating heart of old-time country music. I have been a proud fan of classic country music since the mid-1960s, and I particularly enjoy the big, bold emotions contained in the genre's deceptively stripped-down lyrics. Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard both wrote numerous brilliant songs that contain an almost haiku-like precision and delicacy in the way they convey the "country" mythos. Aside from its great music scene, Nashville boasts fantastic food and has now added a highly successful magic venue to its many other highlights. I booked my Southwest ticket and took that plane to Tennessee.



HIGH PRAISE AND DELIGHT FOR THE WAY THINGS WENT AT THE
HOUSE OF CARDS

PHOTO SUPPLIED BY HOUSE OF CARDS



Photo by House of Cards

MONDAY MORNING.

My flight into Nashville arrived at 9:20 AM on the morning of the 13th of May, and Joey Martinez was there to meet me at the airport. We drove into Downtown Nashville and dropped off my cases at the 20th-floor penthouse condo that houses the week's "celebrity" act. The House Of Cards is about a three-minute walk from the condominium and housed in the basement of the Johnny Cash and Patsy Cline Museums. Both these establishments are tourist (and personal) favorites and are owned by Bill Miller, who is the creator and mastermind behind the House Of Cards. It was Mr. Miller who had the vision to transform a basement space into a 9500 square foot five-star restaurant and magic venue. Miller has an impressive collection of magic memorabilia and the decor inside the restaurant is part museum, part nightclub, and totally elegant. The most obvious inspiration behind the project is the Magic Castle in Hollywood; however, the HOC has streamlined the private magic club format into an incredibly successful up-scale magic bar/restaurant business. Before I continue with the details of my specific week at the House of Cards, let me take the time to discuss the physical venue that I discovered when I made that first early morning tour.

The House of Cards is not a private club, and there is no need for it to be one. Anyone who finds the club, and is wearing a dressy outfit that conforms to the dress code, can stop in and have a drink at the impressive handcrafted antique central bar. The management doesn't make finding the club too easy though, there are almost NO signs or notices that the HOC even exists. This hint of secrecy is just one of the very nice touches that make the club seem especially unique to guests when they have "found" it. Casual guests can order some excellent house specialty drinks or enjoy tasty appetizers



Nick Lewin at the famous GooGoo Candy Shop in Nashville.

at the bar. They can also see some fine magic. There are three nicely appointed close-up magic zones, and on any given night three or four talented magicians are performing sleight of hand for the viewing pleasure of the clientele. Other guests are enjoying a first-class dining experience seated comfortably in tables skillfully scattered around the property. The entire set up is very sophisticated and feels in many ways more like a 1930s speakeasy club than a contemporary restaurant. In writing this story, I will frequently describe the restaurant as a club (which strictly speaking it isn't) because that is very much the prevalent vibe.

The entire club looks GREAT with original posters, antiques and props and other magic memorabilia tastefully displayed throughout the establishment. There is also a very fascinating framed collection of antique playing cards from around the world. My favorite was a card dating back to Germany in 1490. The overall inner decor is Magic Castle red/gold Victorian but in a rather understated and elegant way. The visitors who are formally dining in the House of Cards get a time coded ticket to the show in the Carter The Great Theatre. The Carter Theatre is a nicely equipped parlor magic venue that seats up to 75 but manages to still be a perfect stage for significantly smaller crowds. It has comfortable seating, great sight lines, and a good sound system.

The venue has been very skillfully engineered to pack as much into that prime real estate basement as it will hold, including a humidior, and an outdoor patio with a twenty-foot waterfall. There is no point in buying a nice cigar and having nowhere to smoke it! However, a basement is still a basement, and there are one or two constrictions involved in the reconstruction of the space, but make no mistake the design is first rate. In many ways, the House of Cards reminded me of a beautiful and expensive transformation of the iconic Magic Cellar that existed in San Francisco back during the '70s. I was always a big fan of the Cellar and performed there frequently. The Magic Cellar occupied the basement under Earthquake McGoons Jazz Club. The Cellar came into being after a strange coincidence left the Clute family in possession of the entire Carter poster and magical archives. Many of these "discovered" posters are now incorporated into the House of Cards design. Carter the Great's magnificent center stage table is part of the available equipment in the Carter Theatre, and I instantly recognized it from its earlier outing in the Magic Cellar. Surprisingly, and rather charmingly, the table has been retained as a working prop and not an exhibit. I thoroughly enjoyed performing during the week with my twenty dollars worth of magic props resting on a 12,000 dollar table.

PHOTOS: TOP RIGHT - The Johnny Cash Museum, Nick Lewin with Carter The Greats table, The Tunnel, The House of Cards hall-way and 'close-up' performance.



Photo by Nick Lewin



Photo by Nick Lewin

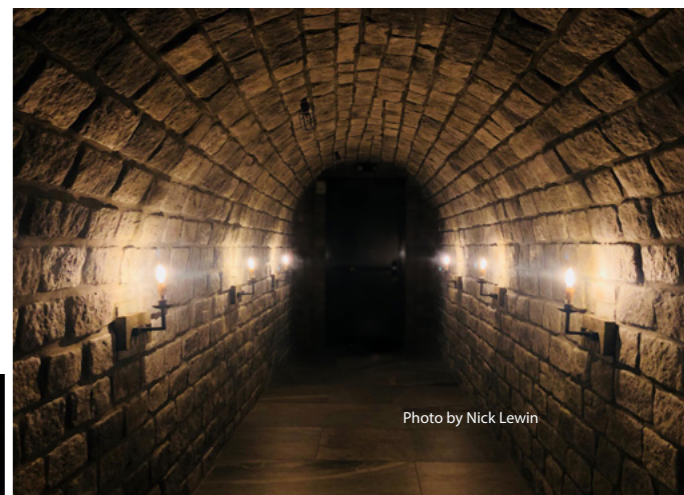


Photo by Nick Lewin



Photo by House of Cards



Photo by House of Cards



Photo by House of Cards

PART TWO

By the time Joey had finished my tour of the House Of Cards, and I had returned to the condominium, I was ready for a rest and a chance to plan what I was going to be performing that week in the club. As my long-term readers may recall, I have been a proponent for many years of the smaller scale magic venues that have been mushrooming up across America recently. The tastes of magical consumers have been cultivated and motivated in recent years by shows like America's Got Talent, and Penn & Teller: Fool Us, that feature stunning parlor magic rather than big or exotic illusions. The very best way to experience magic is being in smaller groups that allow more intimacy in the staging and presentation. I was pleased to be part of this process, and since the vast majority of my bookings have been in large theaters and showrooms, I wanted to get my show precisely right.

The best magician is the one who does the most shows."

LANCE BURTON

MONDAY AFTERNOON.

Sitting in the condo looking out on Nashville, I had to make a few choices about the 30-minute shows that I would be performing that week at the House Of Cards. Like many other magic pros, I tend (or at least try) to gloss over the "no fire" clause in any given contract and hope that my cigarette lighter and a square of flash paper might slip in unnoticed. With the historic Johnny Cash museum above me, and priceless magic artifacts around me, I realized this wasn't going to be one of those weeks, and I would need to surgically remove the burned bill routine that has anchored my act for 40 years. A minimal backstage area was another factor I needed to consider in the construction of my show, and with a possible four shows per night, I needed a show with a very fast reset.

Since I officially retired from high-pressure road work eighteen months ago, I have been enjoying performing in the magic and lecture circuit. I haven't performed at convention and magic venues like the Magic Castle for about thirty years, and it is fun. One of my favorite quotes about magic is from Lance Burton, who says, "The best magician is the one who does the most shows." I couldn't agree more, and with this insight in the back of my mind, I decided to make sure I took full advantage of my upcoming shows. This was the course of action I planned; I decided to add one brand new routine to see how polished it could become in the course of seven nights of multiple shows. I also decided to experiment with linking three of my old magic routines into a brand new sequence, and for good measure, I added a couple of new comedy segments. Quite modest goals that I felt it would be fun to achieve,

MONDAY EVENING.

At 6:00 PM, I popped my props into my computer bag and headed down to the House Of Cards to set up my microphone and organize my sound cues with the room tech. After accomplishing this, I took the time to check out some of the other club features. These include a ghost pianist Thurston who plays musical requests and a nicely appointed seance room. Both of these features were excellent adaptations of favorites back at the Magic Castle in Hollywood. In Nashville, one rather nifty use of the seance room (or "haunted magic show") is a feature entitled Dinner With The Mentalist. This event proves to be a sophisticated blend of great food, shared with personable mentalist Chis Rayman, who tells some great stories and quietly proceeds to blow people's mind with some strong mind reading effects. This low key event certainly got some powerful audience reaction during the week.

After watching them, I discovered that all three of the close-up performers that night were excellent, and they did a great job entertaining and mystifying the crowd. The close-up magicians all entertain for 40- minutes and then take a 20-minute break. The performers that night seemed to have a wealth of strong material, coupled with smooth performance skills, and their attention to detail in not duplicating effects, or routines, was admirable. It was fun getting to know Kevin King, Gary Flegal, Amory Hemetz, Richard Green, and all the rest of the team as my booking progressed. They are a class act and a large part of the success of the club.

The guest management and dining were efficient and friendly. It is not an easy job combining a formal show schedule and guests who are enjoying the food, drink, and ambiance. Everything seemed to run like clockwork throughout the week as far as I could tell, and I was impressed with the way Martinez quietly coordinated and controlled any variables.

That night I left the club with a brown bag filled with two cardboard boxes containing a pork chop and some garlic mashed potatoes!

TUESDAY 11:00 AM.

At 11 o'clock I woke up and nuked my pork chop in the microwave. Even the reheated chop was mouthwatering, as was everything I ate from the restaurant. The entrees were not only delicious but huge, and that pork chop lasted me nearly two days! None of the food or drink items are inexpensive at the House Of Cards, but everything I consumed was definitely worth the price. After I finished my meal, I sat down and went over my notes I had made about my three shows the previous night. I changed my opening trick, cut out a couple of gags, and added a joke about the new wave of "for hire" scooters that were infesting Downtown Nashville. The scooter joke killed that night. I also worked out a few variations on what I would add to my set as the week progressed. It is essential to give your sound tech a surprise or two, and a little change or two helps to keep the performer from getting stale.

After taking care of my "show stuff," I left the condo and walked to the always amazing Country Music Hall Of Fame. The Hall of Fame is incredible and right next to it is the iconic Hatch Show Print Tour where history has been created and printed since 1879. After leaving the Hatch Print Shop, I had a beer and listened to some great music at Mr. Nudie's Honky Tonk. I have always been a fan of Mr. Nudie's legendary country costumes. One of the items on the wall is the iconic gold suit he made for the Young Elvis. Suspended on another wall is the iconic Cadillac that I remember Mr. Nudie driving up and down Lankershim Boulevard in L.A. back in the 70s. Mr. Nudie's Honky Tonk is also owned and operated by the Icon Entertainment Group which contains the House Of Cards in its fold.

After the days worth of sightseeing, that night I performed three more shows at the House of Cards. I made a mental adjustment after show one and re-added one of the jokes I had mentally eliminated that morning. The audiences that night were very nice indeed, responsive and friendly. I think a dress code and a total ban on phone photography have really traveled well to Nashville. One nice touch that guests enjoyed was a professional photographer who makes sure every visitor has a free photograph as a memento of their time visiting the House Of Cards. I did not see one "illegal" photograph or dress code "misdemeanor" during the week. There were many groups of women in the audience, some business groups, bachelorette parties, birthday parties, etc. it is clearly a nightclub environment that ladies enjoy and feel comfortable visiting. Yay, to that!

WEDNESDAY 11:00 AM.

The next morning after my customary Starbucks latte, I listened to the audio recording I had made of my third show the night before. I adjusted a couple of comedy bits and took a look at the overall pacing. I liked the new comedy lines and managed to cut a few words out of each of them to tighten them up a little. While I was doing all of this, I was busy making up my props for the evening shows. Although the act I selected was almost instantaneous in its reset, there was quite a bit of pre-show preparation needed for each of those four possible shows. This

preparation included making up four Gypsy Yarn setups; four wax sealed card in envelope gimmicks, and four Alex Elmsley Torn & Restored Newspaper gimmicks. I am very much a believer in the great Roy Johnson's theory that time spent preparing props the morning before a show is quite different from the last minute panic of preparing props immediately prior to show time. One is a gentle meditative process and the other an invitation to disaster. For me, a real pro should waltz in just ahead of his performance, and make everything look fast and easy.

After I had set my props, I rewarded myself with a visit to the original Goo Goo Shop. The Goo Goo Cluster Bar is one of Nashville's great gifts to humankind, at least to those of us with a sweet tooth! These candy bars were first manufactured over 120 years ago and lay claim to being the very first multiple ingredient type of cluster bar to be sold commercially. There is a large padlocked door in the Goo Goo Shop leading, so it says, to the original secret recipe. I didn't make it through the door, but I am pretty sure that marshmallow, caramel, pecans, and chocolate are all very active ingredients. What makes a Goo Goo Cluster such a fantastic treat taste is the incredibly high quality of the individual ingredients. If you visit Nashville, make sure you enjoy one of these classic bars. While at the store I also picked up a black tee shirt that has the Goo Goo logo on the back, and on the front it says, "What A Cluster..." perfect to wear to the average tech rehearsal at a magic convention.

WEDNESDAY EVENING.

That night we just did two shows, and both were a lot of fun. The House Of Card's audiences are a great crowd, and many people choose the location to celebrate birthdays, bachelorette events, wedding parties, etc. and as noted this makes for friendly and responsive audiences. Just last week the House of Cards was included in a prestigious listing of the 100 Best Restaurants in America for a Big Night Out.

At the end of the evening, I took a filet mignon steak home with me, and it was delicious.

PART THREE

By Thursday night, the week was flying along, and I was having a ton of fun with my shows. I did miss having a dedicated dressing room to relax in between shows; however, the upside to this was that I spent more time out in the club mixing with customers, and this was great for the club. The guests seemed to love chatting one-on-one after the show and getting to meet the performer. It gave a very intimate contact that reminded me a great deal of the Magic Castle in its earlier and less commercial days.

The House Of Cards is a very nicely planned and executed magical restaurant and bar. To the lay audiences who are making it such a success, no-one misses the magic club that lies at the center of the Castle. I have made it a point to see, and be involved in, as many magic venues as possible in the last 50 years including; Islands, Cellars, Lounges, Empires, Castles, Cabarets and Townhouses; and I can honestly say that the House Of Cards is the most enjoyable and successful. The management and staff take care of business and have an excellent eye for detail. I suspect the team could open similar clubs in a great many cities with the same spectacular results, and I certainly hope that this is the case.

Photo by House of Cards

I have been expecting someone to master the development of smaller and exclusive magic venues across America for some time. It is interesting to see the dress code and no photography rule from the Castle being such a positive element in a city as relaxed as Nashville. The House Of Cards has hit a home run with the way they have integrated an elegant formality into what is essentially a very comfortable premise. On a personal level as a performer, I was treated with a great deal of respect and courtesy, which I appreciated.

THURSDAY THROUGH SUNDAY.

During the next four nights, I completed a solid run of 22 half hour shows. All the shows were fun and successful but more important to me was the fact I met my personal goals. I ended up with a brand new killer effect in my repertoire. I overhauled and updated some comedy, and created a very cool new parlor show. My joke about the scooters was getting a big laugh and round of applause by Sunday night. Yay.

Did I get rich performing for the week at the House Of Cards? No! The "House" pays about the same as the "Castle," (which is considerably more than many), however, in this day and age it is lovely to have a high-quality venue to experiment with, and fine-tune a new show. The chance to improve your act is mostly a matter of getting a solid run of shows, and good audiences to accompany them. If a performer isn't moving forward, then he is standing still, and standing still is going backward.

The proliferation of small magic venues that is sweeping the country is stimulating, and could well usher in a whole new "golden era" of magic. Close-up and parlor magic, with a dash of mentalism, contain an endless source of material to entertain contemporary audiences, and the days when a magic show felt incomplete without an illusion or two are well in the rearview mirror. While there will always be the place for a good old fashioned illusion in certain circumstances,

I see a long and healthy future for lay audiences watching intimate magic in intimate settings. The format works on many levels.

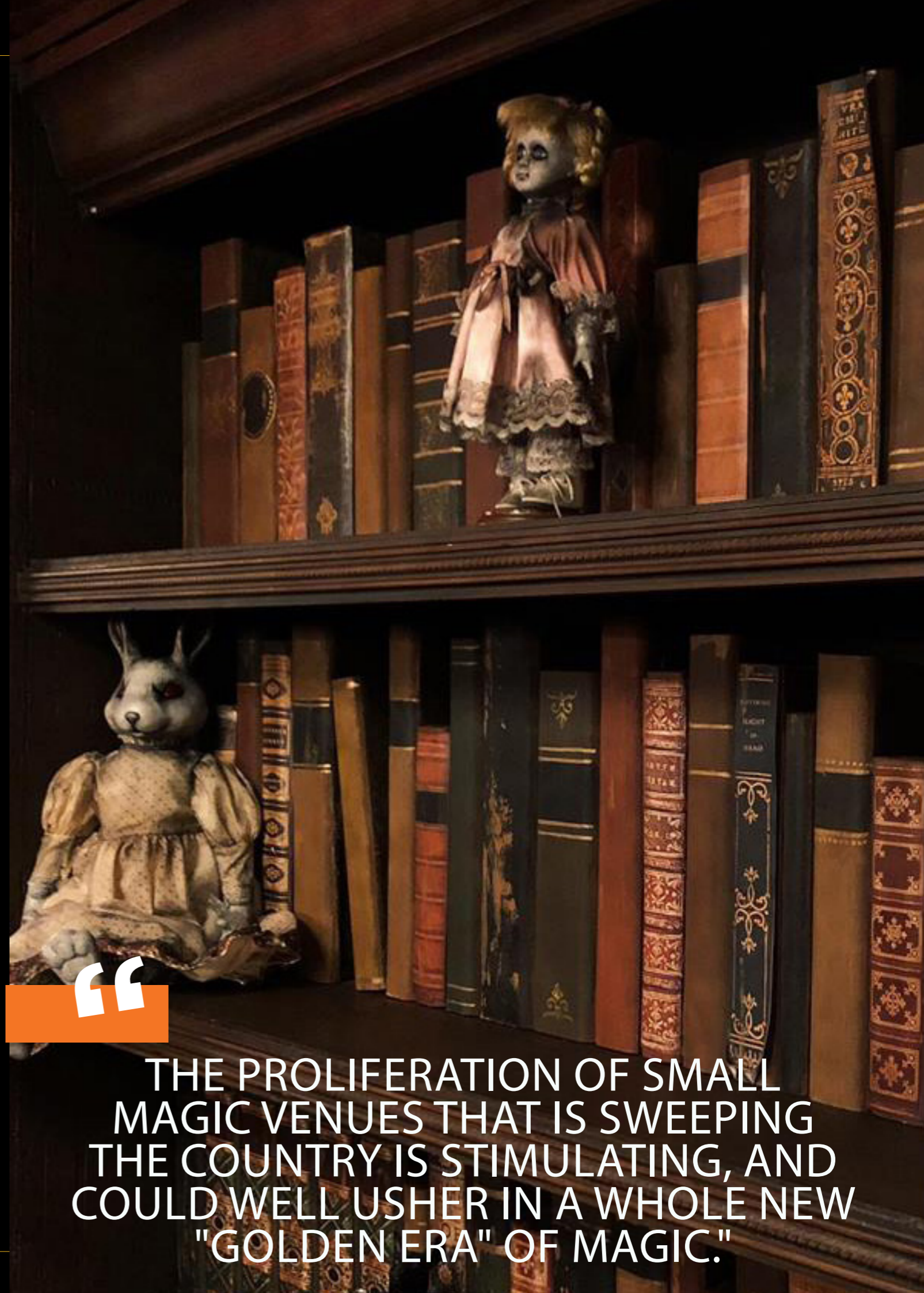
The last thing I did on Sunday night, after packing my suitcase, was to enjoy the slice of cheesecake I had brought back from the club. It was delicious, not quite as good as Hollywood's Musso & Franks (what is?), but definitely within hailing distance!

MONDAY MORNING.

I departed Nashville reasonably early on Monday morning with nothing but high praise and delight for the way things went at the House Of Cards. The team really get things right on the essential details, and nothing is more important than details. I want to thank Mr. Miller and all his staff, especially Joey Martinez, for their professionalism and friendly enthusiasm. I think you all do an excellent job, and I give the entire enterprise an enthusiastic five-star rating. My only regret, damn it, I should have bought more Goo Goo Cluster Bars to take back home to Texas!



Photos supplied by House of Cards



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