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DAVID & DANIA
— QUICK CHANGE! —

Arian Black (right) and Luna Shemada, collaborators on the Divas of Magic website.

PHOTO: RICHARD FAVERY, BECKETT STUDIOS



Magic Divas

By Jaq Greenspon

Making a living as a professional magician is not an easy road to travel. Even in the best of circumstances, making cards appear out of nowhere is not the fast track to fame and fortune — especially if you're a girl. Women still encounter barriers if they choose to be the star, rather than the assistant.

So where does a female magician turn? Wouldn't it be great if a place existed where all her questions could be answered, where her thoughts and ideas were valued, and where the difficulties she might find were solved with kindness, care, and positive enthusiasm? Now take it a step further. How would it be if that female magician who is just starting out had a support group made up of peers and mentors, people who have been where she's at, who know what she's going through, and are right there to jump in no matter the issue, problem, or celebration? What do you say to a girl who is looking for all of that? You point her in the direction of the Divas of Magic, a new web-based community. The only catch? You *have* to be a girl.

Started by Arian Black, an illusionist based in Las Vegas, the site was originally created with a much different purpose in mind. "I had been approached by a television show that wanted to do something with female magicians," explains Black. "They had a couple on the list and I said, 'No, there's a lot more, and there's an easy way to contact them,' and I opened up the website." She took the name from the proposed show title, but explains she didn't think of the American meaning. "In England, 'diva' is a very common word. And it's not a bitchy, self-absorbed singer." The term is used in the U.K. to describe a talented and confident woman, and this is what Black was trying to promote.

The proposed TV show, which started as an idea for an episode of an established series and grew into a concept for a series of its own, is still coming together. Meanwhile, the website has really taken off. Currently hosted on Yahoo, due to its ease of set-up and built-in security features, the plan is for the site to eventually get its own domain. No matter where it is in cyberspace, though, for Black, the Divas has become "so much more" than she thought it would be. But then, it's an idea that has been percolating for a while.

Luna Shemada, who's been involved with magic performances since she was 12, has been tiptoeing around the idea of a female magic group for years. As the daughter of famed magician Shimada, she has been exposed to the male-dominated world all her life, so having a group of bonded women was an instinctive extension of what she'd been going through. "I would see female magicians, and the idea of a support group seemed natural," she says. Working with Black felt like the perfect fit.

Luna and Arian tossed the concept around for a while before either of them did anything with it. Both knew the need for something where, as Shemada says, "we can

create role models for young girls getting into the business." What was missing, though, was a catalyst, something to force their hands. That pressure came from the TV show producers, who were only looking for a way to find female magicians.

Black realized quickly that the site was attracting attention not only from the working performers, the friends of herself and Shemada, but also from a new generation of younger girls, "and they were asking questions." Luna and Arian sensed that this could be what they were waiting for and started putting together information. Once that gate was opened, what could have been a trickle became a flood. "I found that there was a need for information to be out there," Arian explains. "Not just for the younger ones. There were some of the older ones who were getting into their own type of business, leaving their jobs and finding that they want to do their own type of magic as a career, but they don't have the information."

But what kind of information was needed? For Arian, that answer was a bit more complicated than it might seem at first. "All of a sudden I felt extremely responsible for all of these people. It's weird. I still post information on anything and everything I can get my hands on that I think is important to entertainment." The first thing she thought to post, though, was something she knew from personal experience could be incredibly helpful: a few sample contracts, mostly from her own files. "They're just contracts that I've found the easiest to work with and the easiest to use." And already, Black is seeing this instinctive action paying off.

Las Vegas-based Joan DuKore, who is booking more and more shows on her own, found the contract section extremely helpful. "Most of my work usually goes through agencies and I don't have to worry about contracts. Normally I'd be worried about how am I going to do a contract and should I take one of my agent's contracts and change it around to fit me, but I knew I could go to the site and access the information."

The contracts are a plus, as are the business start-up models and performance checklists. But there's more to the site than just commerce. There's also history and camaraderie.

"The girls will email, saying, 'I'm having a problem with this' or 'Can you help me with that,'" says Black. "I get questions about their acts; I get questions about promotional stuff. They ask questions about anything and everything pertaining to magic." These questions are then posted as conversations on the site, creating an open forum for discussion. Women from all over the world can participate and throw their two cents into the mix. For Mandy Davis,

English magician and editor of *Secrets*, the Young Magicians Club magazine for the Magic Circle, it's this "exchange of ideas and tips pertaining to women in magic" that's exciting.

That notion is seconded by Suzanne, a close-up performer who is equally comfortable doing walk-around and working the Magic Castle. She loves having "good conversations about how we can help make this wonderful form of entertainment better for our audiences."

One of the ways they make the form better is by helping each other solve problems. DuKore, who has been working professionally for six years, wishes there had been something like this when she was starting out. "You don't realize that you're going to have to make adjustments for the size of your hand and the lack of pockets and the lack of this and that," she says, noting that most books on magic are written from a male vantage point with an eye towards having a man perform the described illusions.

"Some things cannot be solved by discussion with men," explains Davis.

"The truth is, I've found that when you talk about those things with a guy," says Black, "they either laugh, or they say it's a stupid idea and that it will never work."

"Men think differently" is the theme that comes up when this particular subject is broached. Not wrong, mind you, but different. They don't think like women. Yet most women get started in magic by seeing a man perform. "Women learn magic from a man," says Black. "Which is funny because then they stand like a man, they present the trick like a man, and they do it extremely masculine."

Kate Medvedeva, an award-winning close-up magician from Russia, agrees. "Moves are more comfortable for a man to use, because the inventors were men. But women have advantages, too. Our misdirection can be more powerful — just a little bit of makeup and the right dress..."

As Arian says of lady magicians, "They haven't seen it performed with a female role model, and they haven't seen the nuance added into it. It's only when girls really take that trick and turn it into their own, when they start to say, 'Hey, if I did it this way...'"

And this is where the site comes in handy. Shemada sees the collective as a way to create a safe space where women are given permission to be themselves. "We're all like little witches — and by joining energy we can do amazing things."

Like figure out where to hide the birds in an evening gown? In the 1950s, Celeste Evans revolutionized dove magic for women, because of her useful hiding of the doves. Black explains, "She used to have a dress

Magician or Magicienne?

Among the many topics discussed on the Divas of Magic website, the question of whether or not people liked the word "magicienne" for female conjurers recently sparked quite a debate. Here are excerpts from some of the responses:

I prefer not to use the word... I have worked very hard over the years to be considered an equal and I see part of my equality in being called a magician...

Arian Black

I much prefer "magicienne;" it puts distance between me and all those dull, boring male magicians who give our profession such a bad name. I just want to get to the stage where guys are wishing they could use the term "magicienne."

Fay Presto

I am not defined by magic alone, as we all are not. If one wants to call herself "magicienne" or "magician" — you go, girl!

Raven Pierce

I love the word, actually, but am usually referred to as a female magician.

Mandy Davis

Distinguishing myself as a magicienne actually attracted more attention to me. The title fits my personality and people respond to that. So, alas, I am a magicienne...

Danielle Nelson

I see no need to distinguish myself from my male counterparts other than through my performance. I would rather be a magician first, who happens to be female, than state the obvious that I'm a female magician. That seems very subtle on the surface, but to me it says a lot.

Suzanne

I don't care for the word much and feel it is unnecessary to categorize women from men in the same field.

Luna Shemada

For me, the word sounds weaker and, therefore, has less punch than "magician," almost subconsciously implying that you are weaker and/or not quite as good.

Katherine Rhodes

My first language, Spanish, is gender-based and quite strict in its rules and construction. Every noun has to have a gender. Since this usage is part of the culture, women do not find feminine adjectives offensive at all. It is just part of regular life and vocabulary.

English is not gender-specific; it allows for flexibility of thought and is not strict as far as gender is concerned... Women would naturally have the tendency to feel that they should be more equal to their male counterparts.

Behold, the power of words!

Lupe Nielsen

that had beading up across her breasts and beading down around the hips and waist, and it went into the dress and the rest were on the skirt, and she would produce doves... from her cleavage."

"And this is one woman figuring this out," notes DuKore. "How much greater would it be if there were more women to kind of brainstorm and figure out these problems?" With the Internet, there is that opportunity.

One of those opportunities is a performance at this summer's SAM convention in Louisville, Kentucky. For the first time, the ladies will get their own show: *Arian Black's All Gal Gala*. They are performing on a different night than the men, but will be garnering equal stage time. The show will feature performances by some of the greats in the field, including Pam Thompson, Julianna Chen, Luna, and Arian, as well as members of the up-and-coming generation. While the event itself did not originate with the Divas site, the site was instrumental in finding the acts to perform. Through the ether, Arian was able to scour the country to find the right women for this show.

For Las Vegas locals, the online conversations have started transcending the website. Once a month the Southern Nevada Divas gather for an informal lunch where good things happen.

In addition to food and talk, Shemada, who hosts the event, has challenged the girls to "come up with a new routine every month."

"We sit down and everybody performs that one trick that they're doing," continues Arian. "They have the eyes of everybody else in the room to say, 'Hey, why don't you try it this way or why don't you try doing this?' It just gives them input on something they've never tried before and they don't have to worry about anyone going, 'Oh my god, that totally sucked!' We're all doing something completely new, and we're all going to help."

"It's a safe place for getting an outside eye — the feminist perspective," adds Luna.

"It's becoming like a magic workshop," laughs Black. "I'm all for that. I want the extra eyes to help me become better, and if you have a meeting where there are eight to ten people there, even though all of them are women, they still see things differently from you. And there might be one that says something that takes that trick in a whole new direction you never would have thought of and which works so much better for you. I'm extremely excited about things like that."

"Men don't understand the power of a woman," says Shemada.

But that's not why men are barred from the site. "I wanted a place where women could go," says Arian. "A place where

women felt comfortable and where we could discuss things that were unique to a female magician. Like using Topits and cleavage and all the other things. With the girls, you're just getting the constructive criticism. You're not getting all of that male/female interplay that comes into it."

Which isn't to say that men can't get hold of the information the Divas are privileged to, it's just they don't ask. Black is more than willing to help out anyone who asks, "But I've never had a male magician come up to me and say, 'You know, I really need a contract.'"

The reverse, however, is true. Arian, who started her magical career in Canada doing children's parties when she was not more than a child herself, says, "When I was younger, I never had contracts and I didn't know who to go to. I had asked a couple male magicians, and no, they weren't helpful in giving me contracts. So sometimes, when things are hard, it's nice to have a place to go that's a soft place to fall. And the girls are finding that it's a nice place to go to get that information."

In addition to moving forward, the Divas site is also very good about getting to the roots of magic. Knowing where you came from is almost as much use as knowing where you're going. Each month, Arian and Luna are trying to bring a bit of history to the site with profiles on notables like Melinda, the aforementioned Celeste Evans, and even a piece on Dell O'Dell. "Stacy Jones' father, Chuck Jones, was Dell O'Dell's protégé, and he has a plethora of information about her that nobody else has," says an excited Black. "I want to get the information from whoever, whatever — whether it's men, women, birds — and get it on the site."

For her part, Luna is working on a "philosophical corner" that tackles the ideas of "women fighting to break the stereotype." Shemada is constantly amazed at "how many road blocks we set up for ourselves that aren't really there." She wants to give back and break down the walls that block women. "Half of the women are totally unaware how much power they have."

Sue-Anne Webster of Australia believes, "Once the public sees a woman doing good magic, they're delighted. I think a proficient lady magician who understands general public thinking and uses this understanding to heighten her performance can actually have the advantage over a man in magic. Much exploration in this area needs to be done before it's full potential is recognized."

In addition to the philosophical and practical matters, the website also gives its members the opportunity to promote them-



The Divas gather in Las Vegas: [top row, left to right] Layna - Lady of Illusion, Maria The SnakeBabe, Misty Lee, Luna Shemada, Norann, Lisa Close, Teresa Marie, Abbi Spinner; [bottom row] Arian Black, Tara Losander, Lupe Nielsen, Stacy Jones, Joan Dukore, Deja.

selves. Throughout the site are places for the girls to post photos and bios of themselves as way of introduction to the other members they may not know. Of course, since it's a magic site and nothing is what it seems, here the maxim about a picture and a thousand words may not hold as true as elsewhere. The best way to get to know your fellow Diva is through the online chats and bulletin board discussion group postings. This is the place for the girls to be vocal about what is going on in their own lives and careers, where they can ask specific questions, the answers to which may not be found in the more general sections. This is where the true measure can be taken. Recently, the question was posed of whether or not the word "magicienne" should be used to denote a female magician; the response was overwhelming. "We had over 20 responses in two days," says a shocked Black. It wasn't the reaction she was expecting. "Some girls were for it and some against it, but they were all pretty vocal."

The chats and discussions make Arian's job easier. As the group's founder, she is responsible for the bulk of the writing and

editing, and any help in having the content updated is appreciated.

According to Black, "Luna has bigger dreams for the project than I do. She sees the site a couple years from now with people being able to send in videos, or arrange for people to get together with us in person and ask for help, to sit down with Luna and myself or several other people and work on pieces."

The Divas, then, are the answer to the IBM. "Yes, it's our *sisterhood*," says Arian. "One of the things I'm hoping for is that once women get organized and we become a union and some kind of force, then the men can come in and be a part of it. Instead of us going into their world, they're coming into ours, and I think the two will mix better. I think magic in general will become whole because it will have two strong sides. It will have its yin and it will have its yang."

"It hasn't had a yin," interjects DuKore. "No, it hasn't had that female side," says Black, but adds with optimistic enthusiasm, "I'm hoping that by creating this sisterhood, it will create that yin that will melt in and mix with the guys. Right now, it's still an

infant, it still needs to be grown and cultivated." And she wants that for professionals and enthusiasts alike.

"Remember," adds DuKore. "Amateurs are one of our most important forces in magic. Some of the legends were amateurs. They had other jobs and other lives. This is what they did for their hobby and they came up with some of the most brilliant stuff that is still talked about and done today."

Says Black. "I want the young girls who are on the site, 20 or 50 years from now, to be the innovators in magic that we have in men today. And I want them to be that way because they had access to all the information. That's what I'd like to see."

With the 100-plus members so far, and a possible TV show in the works, Arian Black is well on her way to seeing that dream become a reality. ♦

The Divas of Magic website can be found at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/magicdivas>.

Jaq Greenspon is a freelance writer and magic aficionado. Currently, he's wondering, "Is this your card?"