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# GENIE

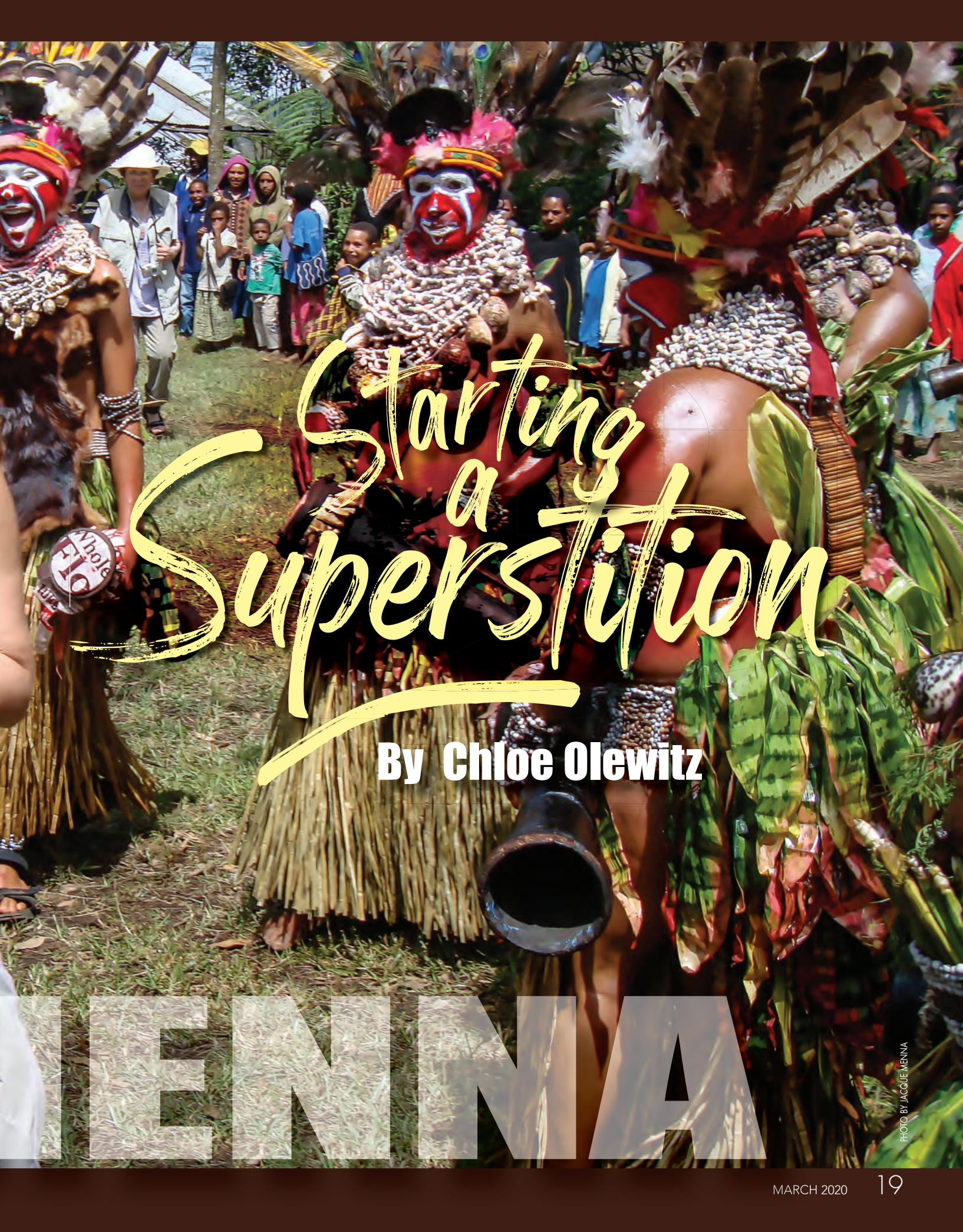
THE CONJURORS' MAGAZINE



**LISA  
MENNA**



# LISA W



# Starting a Superstition

By Chloe Olewitz

# MENNA

PHOTO BY JACQUE MENNA



A teenaged Lisa assisted by Muhammad Ali at the 1982 Desert Magic Seminar

**Lisa Menna was one of the last to compete at the Las Vegas Desert Magic Seminar's open close-up session in 1982, when she was 17 years old. It was a long day, and she remembers how the checked-out audience had perked up at the sight of a**

**young woman in a white, form-fitting, knit dress.**

**Waiting in the wings before her set, Menna noticed a celebrity sitting in the front row that no one had called on yet. She decided to go for it, and walked straight toward him to ask, "Could you please come help me?" Whatever attention she had gotten for being a gender anomaly in the 20-person close-up competition was dwarfed by the fact that the girl had just picked Muhammad Ali.**

**When he joined her on stage, Menna doubled down on her care-free clown character. "Hi! My name's Lisa! What's your name?" She had no idea that her feigned innocence would get such a big reaction. "My name's Joe," Ali responded. "Joe Frazier." More laughter.**

**"Gosh Joe, you sure have big hands," Menna said. The room erupted.**

Menna was born in Connecticut in 1964. When she was four years old, her family relocated to St. Louis, where she encountered magical clown Steve "Ickle Pickle" Bender at her older brother's birthday party. When she was seven, Menna received her first magic set as a gift from her mother, who during her own youth had mailed in 57 Popsicle wrappers collected over the course of a single summer in exchange for a set of multiplying billiard balls.

The Menna family moved to Humble, Texas,

when Lisa was nine, and by the following year she was putting together her first act. But becoming a magician wasn't Menna's primary goal, she had simply decided to begin planning for her future. When she read in *American Girl Magazine* that college would cost \$40,000, the young mathlete calculated total tuition against minimum wage and subtracted the hours she'd be in school or asleep. "I realized there wasn't enough time if I needed to pay for college," Menna tells *Genii*, "so I started a business."

Between that beginner's magic set, library books by Bill Severn and Henry Hay, her early Ickle Pickle inspiration, and *Boys' Life Magazine*, Menna collected enough material to put on a show. She practiced for two years, and a week before her 12th birthday she debuted "Lisa Lollipop," the birthday party clown. It was illegal to work in Texas before the age of 15, and she figured no one would notice she was 12 if she hid behind clown makeup.

Menna's popularity soon outgrew her small suburban town; when she kept seeing the same kids at birthday parties five or six times a year, she realized her five-trick repertoire wouldn't cut it. Her hunt for new material is what eventually led Menna to the wider magic world, and by age 15 she had discovered magic shops, conventions, and magazines.

"Within a year I had decided to make a Pac-Man trick and publish it in *Genii*," Menna says. She sliced mouths into 100 sponge balls she had ordered from Al Goshman, glued googly eyes onto cut-out ghosts, and called the routine "Pac-Mania." Soon after, when Menna's parents planned to attend an advertising convention in Las Vegas, she found that the dates coincided with the Las Vegas Desert Magic Seminar.

The Seminar's close-up competition offered a \$1,000 prize that year, but Menna remembers seeing it as a free opportunity to demo "Pac-Mania" for a captive audience. "It made perfect sense; I'll be in the contest, everyone will see what a hip idea it is, and buy my trick," she says. "I was 17, in high school, and I had never done a show where I wasn't a clown. I had only done birthday parties up to that point." It wasn't until later that Menna came to understand the who's who that was in the audience: Marlo, Vernon, Copperfield, Slydini, Blackstone, and Siegfried & Roy, to name a few. Daryl, Ammar, Ackerman, Tamariz, Ascanio, Williamson, and Heba Haba Al had all performed in the all-star close-up show earlier that day.

The fact that Menna's "Pac-Mania" routine required her volunteer to play along meant she would be asking Muhammad Ali to be goofy, sound effects and all. When she showed him the first sponge ball, she made the *boing, boing, boing* noise and said, "That's your sound,

can you make that sound?" Menna says, "He looked at me and I looked at him, and there was this moment between us where he's like, 'Okay kid, I'm going to do this. We're in this together.' The audience didn't know, but I could see it."

Menna says that once Ali had bought into their impromptu collaboration, he was generous with his wit. "We were improvising, but he would serve up these jokes and I would smash them home. Not once did he try to take credit. He would give me half a joke so I could kill it, knowing very well that he was just making me look good."

Ali went along with the *boing boing* and *pfift pfift* noises that Menna had refined with her typical five-year-old audiences. Her precociousness led to a script full of references to Shakespeare and Plato, and to her ability to riff along with Ali so seamlessly. To this day, people ask her how she could have accidentally picked Muhammad Ali.

Menna doesn't mind that people missed the subtlety of her performance that day. In the end, it was worth it. When her routine was over, a smiling Menna kept up the ruse and thanked Ali for volunteering: "Joe, you're the greatest." He turned and replied, "No, Lisa, you're the greatest!" Richard Turner won that 1982 close-up competition, but Menna still remembers her standing ovation. "David Copperfield stood up and they all stood up. That was the beginning of everything."

Lisa Lollipop at 13. Her business cards went from home-made to printed. Last year one of Lisa's 1975 birthday clients died and his family returned the homemade business card to her—45 years later.





Above, Lisa, age 17, spent the summer doing magic and driving an ice-cream truck. Right: Armed with a new Double Undercut and a new DoubleLift, and having no idea how far they would take her.



## While Menna ventured

beyond Humble's city limits into the broader magic world, the '80s raged on. She was a strong character, and performed a strong character, and did not fit the mold of the community's expectations for what a girl in a dress could or would do. "Nothing about what I did took advantage of my female wiles, I was just there doing my thing," she says.

She tried to attend Tannen's Magic Camp but found that they weren't yet welcoming girls when her application was rejected. "It wasn't 'No girls allowed,' it was 'We've never had a girl and we don't have the facilities for you.'" She filled out a second registration as Lee Menna, thinking she might slip one by management. "They wrote back saying, 'We know who you are, you can't come.'"

"When I started, there were no other women in magic with the exception of June Horowitz, Diana Zimmerman, and Tina Lenert," she says. But while Menna had become aware that there were few women in the field, she never felt excluded. She worked hard and wanted to learn, and the community appreciated and rewarded her willingness to put in the time. She had chops, and the magicians she admired began to take notice.

"All of the great magicians pulled me aside, sat me down, and made me better," Menna says. "They invested in me because they wanted to see a thinking woman succeed. There was still the background conversation of 'Honey, don't let him know how smart you are, you'll never get married.' That was just starting to change. But the serious crafters were so kind and so beautiful."

Menna developed from a preternaturally smart, adolescent clown—and the only girl in the room—into a whip-smart businesswoman and respected all-around performer (and still sometimes clown). She learned early on to distinguish between earned opportunities and those inspired by her novelty factor. "On the list of sleight of hand artists that were possible, I was at the bottom. But I was a girl, so they invited me," Menna says.

"I know very well that a lot of my opportunities came to me because there wasn't another

woman doing sleight of hand in the magic world. But in the real world, nobody had any idea there were no women magicians. They had only seen two magicians in their lives, and they happened to be men. The magic world work I got because I was a girl, but the real world work I got because I got.”

To this day, awe at Menna’s chops still falls easily from the lips of virtually every male magician who witnessed her emergence in the 1980s. She wasn’t afraid to use difficult sleight of hand to prove herself in front of some of the best magicians in the world. But Menna also remembers that back then, when she performed a trick predicated on a One-Handed Bottom Deal, the male magicians who saw it were completely baffled. It didn’t occur to anyone to look for a One-Handed Bottom Deal from her. “It wasn’t even in the realm of possibilities,” she says. “I also fooled them hard because I was a girl.”

Beyond her own journey, Menna began to realize that, as a whole, magicians weren’t particularly kind to each other. “They were

competitive and snaky,” she says, “but I had never experienced that. When I got a little successful, they got a little pissed off, but only some of them and never to me directly. The best of them didn’t see me as competition, they saw me as a completely different category.” She used her access to “the best and the worst of them,” as she puts it, to create an art project she envisioned would be her gift to the magic community—hundreds of magicians’ faces cast in plaster.

The effort began at a Las Vegas convention in the 1990s. “There were a bunch of heavies sitting at a table—John Carney, David Williamson, Dennis DeBondt—a bunch of really A-list guys, all riffing on each other and telling jokes. And I’m funny, okay?” Menna asks rhetorically. “I’m a really funny performer, and I’m not funny because I have a catalog of jokes—I’m *funny*.”

But at that table, every time Menna said something she knew was funny, the group ignored her. At some point, she brought up her idea to cast magicians’ faces, and Williamson responded

Lisa with Slydini, around 1982



Channing's eyes are open because he refused to participate unless Llsa learned to carve the eyes opened. "He did not want to spend eternity with his eyes shut," she said.



Jerry Andrus



Charles Reynolds



Channing Pollock

with a crass joke. Everyone laughed. Then, a week later, he called Menna to apologize, lamenting that he'd gone too far. He offered to do "that face-casting thing" she'd mentioned, and she convinced him, falsely, that she'd done it before. They made plans to meet the following day, giving Menna approximately 24 hours to find a local art supply store and figure out how to cast a person's face for the first time.

She worked out what she could, winged the rest, and luckily, Williamson's mold came out perfectly. Since then, she has cast over 100 magicians, including David Roth, David Kaye, and *Genii* Chief, Richard Kaufman, whom she

describes as an Adonis in his day (when his face wasn't moving). Since floodwaters from Hurricane Harvey carried some of the originals away from her Houston home in 2017, she has archived the casts more carefully. She even had seven of her favorite faces recast in bronze: Channing Pollock, Billy McComb, Karrell Fox, Charlie Reynolds, Jerry Andrus, Jay Marshall, and Johnny Thompson.

Over the years, face casting became a way for Menna to meet new people and make friends in the community. She was in her 30s when Darwin Ortiz decided to join the face-cast club at a Magic Summit in Washington, D.C. She had discovered by then that having one's face fully submerged in wet goop can cause claustrophobia and general panic, so she learned to invite her subjects' friends to hang out, tell jokes, and she would calm the model magician down with a foot massage. During Ortiz's session, Menna managed to secretly paint in nail polish a "7" on one big toe, and a "♦" on the other.

For all Ortiz knew, he'd just been pampered while having his face cast. But that evening, John Carney performed a card trick for him. "It was like the king doing a card trick for the other sovereign king," Menna says. "Everybody stops to look. John forces the card, shuffles them, plays around, and says, 'Look in your pocket.' Darwin looks in his pocket, nothing. He has him look in his sleeve, nothing. 'Unbutton your shirt!' Nothing." It went on like this, until Carney had Ortiz remove each shoe and then each sock one at a time. Between seeing the "7" and reaching for his second sock, Ortiz started putting it all together.

"That day, Paul Harris told me I became one of the in-crowd," Menna says. "He dubbed me a true inner-circle magician after that." Ortiz promised that if it took a lifetime, he would get even with her. He hasn't, yet.







Tim Conover



Jay Marshall



Karrell Fox

Below: The Cube Zag and Zig Zag props in the background of these trade show photos show how Lisa used one environment to transition to the next.

*The first brochure* that Menna designed when she left college showed only her head and her hands. “I didn’t want to be hired for my body,” she says, and she thought at the time, “if I get old or fat, I’ll print this now and I’ll have it forever.” It was a folding brochure, the kind made to hang in a filing cabinet, and she had centered a “master magician” label on the display tab. But a magician Menna respected warned her that she couldn’t possibly become a master until she was at least 50 years old. She accepted the challenge readily, crafting a training plan to make herself worthy of the title.

“I thought, ‘Okay, what should I do between now and 50 to become a master magician? That was very conscious in my mind,” Menna says. There wasn’t a precise timeline for the journey, but she’d heard of the seven-year itch. She spent seven years exploring one isolated category of magic at a time, starting with close-up, making her way to stand-up, and then to the stage illusions that she took into her corporate work.

Menna squeezed as much as she could out of her creative cross-training, learning to adapt her close-up skills to deepen her work on stage, and vice versa. “I remember the struggle,” she says, “but I’m sure that because of it I’m equally as competent on stage as I am with close-up, even if the magic community thinks of me as a close-up magician. I wanted to be a professional in every aspect. I was going to be a mentalist for seven years except by the time I got to the age where I could sell it, there were so many freakin’ mentalists.”

Although she has created characters from Lisa Lollipop the birthday party clown to the geriatric Mama Menna (who bears no resemblance to her actual mother), Menna may be best known for her work as a trade show magi-

cian. During her stand-up period, she worked for the biggest names in technology and was crowned “the darling of dot com.” *The Wall Street Journal* printed that Menna brought in 10 times as many leads as a standard trade show display.





Top left: Pitching while "zagged";  
 Top right: "Mentioning that Jules Fisher loved magic and would be watching my tape always got me better lighting";  
 Bottom left: Amway Thailand, the first time she used a live interpreter;  
 Bottom right: Sun Microsystems, Taiwan, in 2001.

She changed the game while working the circuit, first by pricing herself against other vendors and entertainers instead of other magicians, allowing her to raise her rates from \$1,000 a day to \$5,000, and eventually from \$5,000 to \$10,000. She is also responsible for eliminating the counter set-up that had previously blocked performers' lower halves from view, a then-standard approach that Eddie Tullock had popularized. Menna instead performed beside a vertical pedestal that held her props, positioning herself closer to passersby and helping her draw crowds quicker. She also pulled her stage away from the aisles of the trade show floor so that she could seat 15 people in her front row instead of four. Her crowds grew exponentially.

One of the things Menna is most known for is her "High Heel Card Stab." She had been working on a routine that she planned to end by swapping out a card using a trick box, until Peter Studebaker suggested that she reveal the

card in her shoe instead. From that off-hand comment, Menna began creating the piece that would form the backbone of her repertoire for many years to come. She performed an Ambitious Card routine, ending with the first participant's card spiked on her stiletto, often more than once. And instead of revealing the second card merely inside her shoe, she revealed it between her stocking and her bare foot. "You'd have to rip my stocking to get it, and just for fun I'd get the really hard to tear kind," she says.

Between Menna's trade show days and her entry into corporate shows, Ricky Jay advised her to star in a theatrical run. "He said the big thing that changed his life was the day people bought a ticket to see him," she says. "If you happen to be at a party and there's magic, it's great. But if you buy a ticket, take a shower, wash your hair, and get ready to go to the theater, that's a lot of time and energy in anticipation of having a good time. That's a completely

different audience.” Menna started four-walling theaters at ski resorts like Telluride and Sun Valley, performing one show a week and skiing to stay in shape.

It’s in this multitude of ways that Menna’s career defies categorization. She performed at gatherings like the New York Magic Symposium and FFFF, and appeared on Juan Tamariz’s acclaimed television show, *Chantatachán*. She was the first woman ever to perform in every room of The Magic Castle. She worked with a cast of Russian circus professionals at the Palazzo dinner theater cabaret in Vienna. “I thought it would be interesting to work with four-generation circus artists,” she says. “If you were trained in the Soviet Empire, you lived or died by how well you did your art, so all the ambitious people made art. I wanted to work with those people before I retired.” She was 38 years old.

*Menna likes to say* she pays her bills in Texas, keeps her possessions in Canada, and rests—when she rests—in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Although her corporate trade show days are behind her, the selling mindset remains prevalent in Menna’s performances of late. These days she presents a sort of trade show in the jungle: “I gather a group of people and I sell them something. It wasn’t a new skill-set for me. Now I’m just selling them an idea.”

In 2011, Menna founded Cause to Wonder, a non-profit organization that uses magic to inspire curiosity and facilitate an exchange of life-changing ideas. But she didn’t wake up one morning with an urge to start a non-profit; of all things, Cause to Wonder began when Menna was invited to pitch *Dragon’s Den*, the Canadian version of the U.S. television show *Shark Tank*, on which wealthy investors bid to back early-stage startups and latent businesses.

“I was trying to figure out what I was going to do on the show,” she says. “Because I don’t really want to work, I’m perfectly happy living off my investments, enjoying myself, being a popular girl, getting up in the morning and having no responsibilities. I was burned out, I worked hard for my life for a long time. The idea of going back and doing something ... I’d have to do something I really loved.”



Volunteer Mary Vargo got the Cause to Wonder trademark registered. Volunteers with special skills are always welcome at Cause to Wonder, says Menna.



During her brainstorm, Menna discovered Lawrence Brilliant, an epidemiologist and philanthropist who in the 1970s led a needs-based relief caravan of 40 do-gooder hippies through developing countries in Europe and Asia (hot off the flower power music tour that featured in the documentary film, *Medicine Ball Caravan*). After breaking from the group, Brilliant partnered with the World Health Organization in an attempt to end smallpox, which was officially

eradicated in 1980. He went on to run a number of non-profit health organizations serving citizens of the global third world.

Menna latched on to the vision of Brilliant's successes, including his hippie-loaded and health-focused bus. The *Dragon's Den* segment in which she pitched her magic bus concept never aired, but Menna had found something worth investing in, with or without the Dragons' help. She started testing the waters in Papua New Guinea, evaluating the potential impact of her program. Soon after, she piled a small team into a van named Charlie and set off on an inaugural trip to Ethiopia. Could touring a modest magic show with a message inspire a lasting paradigmatic shift in the social dynamic of the developing world?

In short and over time, Menna has found that the answer is yes. She presents simple magic, using sponge balls and rocks plucked from the ground in village squares. Cause to Wonder relies on the fact that people in many parts of the world have never seen magic before. If Menna's audiences are aware of magic at all, they likely fear its darker implications for their religious and spiritual beliefs. It's specifically in these spaces that Cause to Wonder leverages the nature of curiosity as a mindset inherently able to cause receptivity. "If you want someone to think, give them cause to wonder," she says.

Street performing in Peru





Above: In Kenya, Menna is planting the seeds of change with children whom she hopes will remember the magic words “Helping women brings good things.” She learned that a bridesmaid from the the Hammer tribe volunteers to be beaten by the groom at the wedding to show her love for her friend, the bride. Symbolically she is accepting the first of many beatings.

Menna believes that the experience of magic pries open people’s preconceptions and previously unquestioned beliefs, and the openness created by wonder allows her to subtly begin to challenge those assumptions. She threads a song through every Cause to Wonder performance, wrapping deep messages in catchy jingles that are easy to remember. The con-

cepts she introduces into her audience’s state of wonder are designed to spark dialogue, inspire compassion, and change lives. “In some cases,” Menna says, “just leaving the phrase in the village to spread is enough. Because if they argue, we win. It’s true, no it’s not, it’s true, no it’s not. And we win.”

Cause to Wonder’s methodology is com-

Below: In the Indian village of Suriwala, no one had ever seen a foreign person until Lisa Menna arrived. Having performed in the schools during the week, the show, announced in the village square for the weekend, was attended by 1,500 people. The moment Menna raised her hand to do a magical pass, all the children shouted, “If you want to have a good luck, do not beat women.” The adults looked around; all the women were smiling and the men were either delighted or terrified.





In Papua New Guinea with the Huli Wigmen. Their ceremonial wigs are made from the wearer's own hair.

plex, and Menna has spent the past few years figuring out how to best explain it. When she first started the non-profit, Menna wasn't yet aware of the evolutionary and social theories that have come to drive its work. Since then, spreading the message of Cause to Wonder—not to mention fundraising to support an international non-profit—has required her to develop a more academic approach.

When Menna discovered Theatre for Social Change, an applied drama theory dedicated

to works of art created by the communities they serve, she realized it spoke to many of the underlying concepts she had intuitively built into Cause to Wonder. These kinds of scholarship gave Menna access to a lexicon that helped her explain the work she was already doing; for example, Menna has been adamant that, at least once, the magic phrases she sings must fall from the mouths of respected elders, chiefs, and spiritual leaders. Community ownership over the art work's message is a founda-



PHOTOS BY JACQUE MENNA



These men could be shopping for additional wives; two pigs and a goat are considered a reasonable trade for a wife.



Even the mightiest of warriors is brought down by trying to imitate the woman who blew up the animal balloon

tional tenet of Theatre for Social Change.

While she's out and about in the world Menna likes to explain her work with some version of: "I'm a magician, and sometimes I go into the jungle in a village in Africa where women are bought and sold for pigs, and I make a rock disappear and then I whisper, 'If you let girls go to school, the village will be lucky.' And then I leave. When I first started talking about it, I couldn't explain it well," she says. "It's such a complicated thing; I'm doing



Punjab, India: None of the women in this photo will ever be able to leave the house without permission. Most will marry a man they have barely met, move into his home, serve his parents, and never return to her family.

magic tricks, and I'm using these magic words, and I'm hoping people will repeat them."

Repetition will lead to superstition, and superstition will lead to belief, perhaps, in parts of the world where belief is what drives action. Cause to Wonder's main project aims to change prevailing attitudes about domestic violence. The goal is to embed into the public consciousness a simple idea: Helping women brings good things. The phrase originated as "helping women brings good luck," but when Menna discovered that Christian communities in the Caribbean were offended by the word "luck," she began adapting the particulars of the phrase to satisfy regional customs and communicate in hyper-local dialects.

Now when she travels for Cause to Wonder, Menna works with interpreters and local leaders to develop unique versions of the phrase that will connect most with their communities while still honoring its message. In some parts of the world, offering luck couches a poten-

tially abrasive idea into something people already want: good fortune. Elsewhere, removing luck from the equation avoids the fraught need to define it, and bringing "good things" is sometimes more palatable for those likely to balk at the white woman hawking goodies. But in a way, luck and good things are all boogie prizes dancing around the superstition's real commandment: help women.

Iterations of the superstition have promised good things to those who "help women," "don't hit women," or "don't kill women." Cause to Wonder clearly names domestic violence in regions where abusing women and girls is not a shameful open secret, it's an accepted—if not encouraged—cornerstone of social life. The hitting and the killing aren't exaggerations played for attention; they are everyday realities. Helping women brings good luck. Helping women brings good things. Tomato, tomato.

While Menna does hope the messages she



communicates become a part of life in the communities where she performs, she's not too bothered with whether they become superstitions—with all the trappings of belief that entails—or are adopted as household sayings and passed from generation to generation. She does feel that the universality of “good things” gives the saying more integrity. “But I don't have that much integrity,” she says. “I'm happy to say it's luck if you don't hit your wife. I don't need to bring you around to ending domestic violence through ethics. I'd hit you over the head with a trash can if it made you not hit your children and your wife. Just once. Just so you could see.”

Once, when she was doubling back through a village three weeks after performing there, Menna woke up early to find breakfast. On her route she saw a hotel laundress—a 10-year-old girl—scrubbing her way through a pile of sheets twice her height. Menna passed within earshot of the girl, and quickly realized that she was singing “helping women brings good things” from the show she had seen weeks before. It was an important moment for Menna; she knew then that the message had grown roots, and that they were likely to last. It was also a reminder that she will never know the girls who cling to the song for hope, or the boys who internalize it and stand for change.

In order to more formally document Cause to Wonder's on-the-ground impact, Menna sent a social scientist to Mozambique 18 months after she had performed there. Six months of interviews fed an official Measures & Impact Report that showed, a year and a half after the performances, a 104 percent retention rate of the message Menna had communicated through her magic. A higher than 100 percent retention rate indicates that the people who saw Menna's show had integrated the message into their lives, but even further, it proves that the idea had spread to people who

had never seen the magic to begin with.

Turning the message into a song has certainly helped secure the words in people's memories long after Menna leaves. “Elders remembered every magic trick because the novelty was so high,” she says, “but all of the children could recall the jingle.” The short tunes quickly become raucous chants in the mouths of excited children watching a magic show.

“How do you stop yourself from any bad habit?” Menna asks. “If you review it five times a day—morning, noon, and all meals—then you're only a few hours away from recommit-



ting yourself to this new behavior. That has an impact on your decisions. When something exciting happens to you, you think about it all the time. Maybe it's just enough to reroute the synaptic pattern.”

Magic as entertainment is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for most people that Cause to Wonder touches. There's the exciting event, then there's the song, a catchy phrase that people can invoke either privately or publicly to recall the memory. And the more the songs spread, the more the superstitions root, the more powerful their effects become. “If I say to

Above: This is part of the “poop show” in Mozambique, where Menna used a thimble move to find poop behind everyone's ears and demonstrate how if someone defecates in the lake everyone gets poop on them.



Papua New Guinea: "In every tribe around the world, girls get ready to go out the same way: by doing each other's make up."

you, 'If you hit your sister, you'll have bad luck,' that's one thing. But if I say it to you and you've already heard it here, there, and there, suddenly it's like, 'Yeah, everybody knows that.'

"Helping women brings good things" isn't the only superstition Cause to Wonder seeks to spread. The shows in Mozambique, for example, offered another idea: "A clean lake is a happy life." Menna put the Cause to Wonder methodology to work in an attempt to teach five villages around Lake Malawi the importance of becoming stewards of the water source on which they all rely. But creating an educational program to explain bacterial science and potability, for example, would have been less effective than the magic Menna presented in "the poop show."

First, she produced endless clean water from

a lota-bowl and began musing about possible sources of clean water. She added soap to the bowl to represent doing laundry in the lake, turning the water into a slush powder blob to help visualize the effects of lake contaminants. Then brown "poop" appeared in a glass of water held under a baby, and Menna explained that "if somebody poops in the water, everybody gets poop on them." She used thimble moves to pull "poop" off of everyone within arm's reach. When she drank from the contaminated water, a stream of 25 fake poops fell from her mouth. People were horrified. Finally, she buried the poop and spring flowers grew from the dirt, representing dry composting.

The drinking wells that another non-profit had built around the perimeter of Lake Malawi had been dismantled for their nuts and bolts,

While some school programs are organized, it is the apparent spontaneous encounter that has the most impact when it comes to having the audience become the storyteller and spread the magic words.

which villagers perceived as more valuable than a clean water source. The problem wasn't a lack of technology, it was a lack of understanding—no one had explained the dangers of using a single water reserve for everything from drinking water to washing clothes and personal hygiene to sewage. Or at least, no one had explained it in a way that stuck.

Whether her message is about honoring women as whole human beings or teaching communities the importance of clean water, Menna understands that magic is a powerful way to make change. “I didn't know about cognitive dissonance; I just knew that when you were wondering, you were paying attention. I didn't know that we evolved to be innate novelty-seeking creatures, or that curiosity was an adaptive drive. I just knew people were curious.”

*When Menna was 19* years old, she started feeling lost. She wasn't sure whether she would make it as an entertainer and had begun to question where her life would take her. She traveled to Sri Lanka with her college's semester at sea program, and despite all her doubts, her love of magic bubbled up to the surface. While traveling through a village by herself, she made a rock disappear for a child without thinking twice. Suddenly she found herself surrounded by a crowd, performing magic they had ever seen before.

“They loved me. The smiles on their faces were so vibrant, and their eyes were so alive,” Menna recounted in a podcast interview last year. “I thought, I've finally crossed over ... I'm going to be a great magician. Look at me! I'm great.” But her self-praise was interrupted when a Sri Lankan woman pushed through the crowd to drop a bundle of rags in Menna's arms. Menna had enough time to see she was about her same age before the woman dropped to her knees and kissed Menna's feet. When she unwrapped the bundle, Menna saw she was holding a deformed baby.

She was so ashamed of what had happened,



of how her ego had clouded her compassion and made her magic selfish, that she concocted a new ending to the story. She started telling people that she had left that crowd with a promise that the baby would be lucky, but warned that they wouldn't find out why until its 35th birthday, hoping the legend would force them to care for the child. That part never really happened, but it offers a glimpse into the power Menna now understands a simple magic trick can hold.

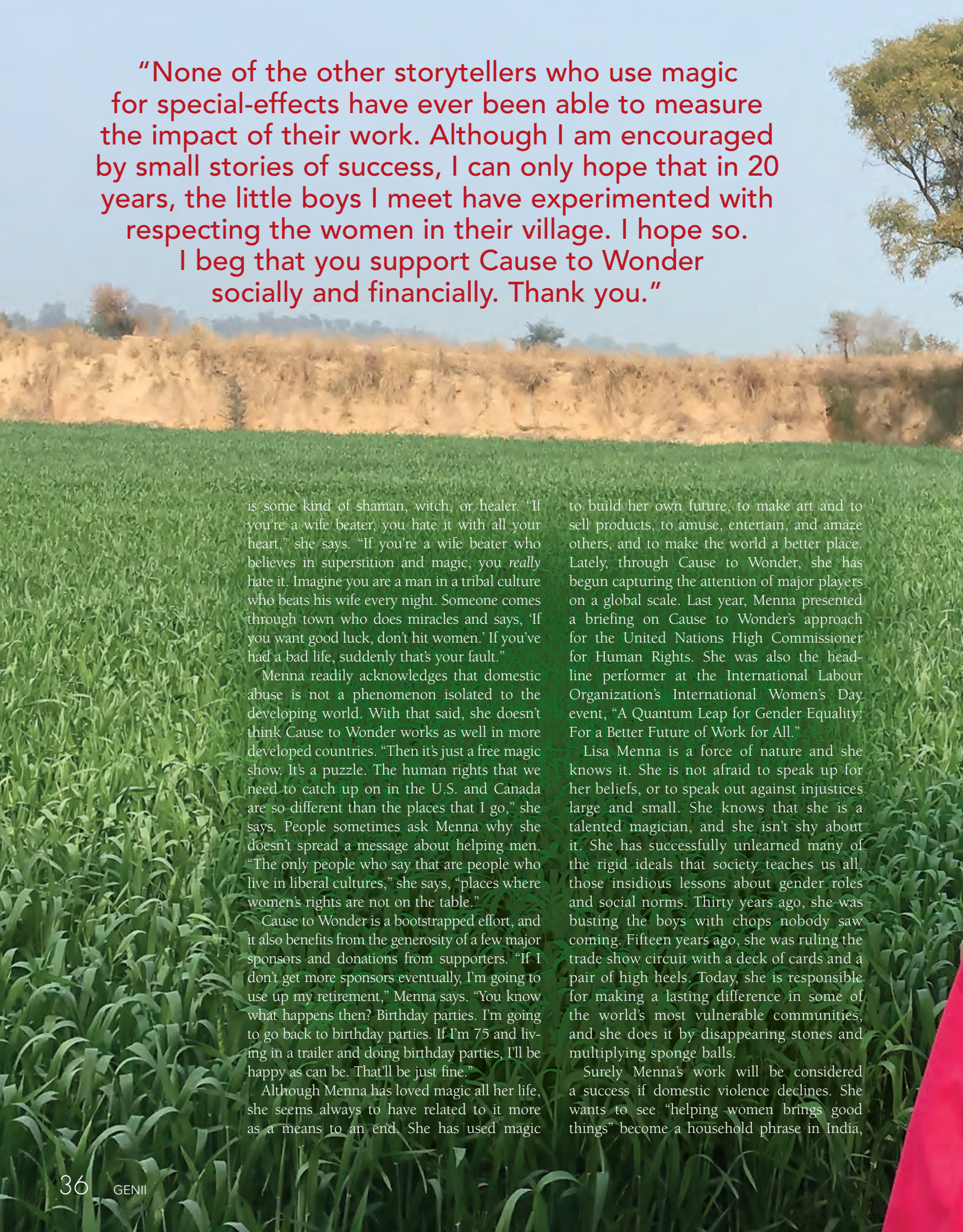
Menna says that since she started Cause to Wonder, magicians have disagreed with the way she allows her audiences to construe her magic tricks as miracles. “They're offended because I'm using magic to fool people,” she says. “And to me, I tricked somebody into believing that domestic violence is wrong. I'm good with that.”

The care that Menna takes to advertise her performances accurately serves her audiences as much as it serves magicians' ethics. It also helps protect her—when Menna first makes a pebble disappear, it's common for her audiences to start picking up rocks of their own, preparing to defend or attack. Fear-driven responses force her to work to win her crowds over to the side of entertainment and fun because it is only in safe spaces that adaptive, evolutionary wonder can emerge.

But the very message that Cause to Wonder seeks to spread also makes it crucial for Menna to dissuade her audiences of the idea that she

Below: Cause to Wonder handouts. The cartoon is for illiterate people, encouraging them to let their daughters get an education. The other two are the first and second versions of the expression, “If you want to have good luck, don't hit women.” Girls who study can become phone operators, teachers, and police—all jobs available to women in India. An impact study showed that signage provokes conversation, and reinforces the long-term impact. Menna gave away 30,000 stickers in India.





**“None of the other storytellers who use magic for special-effects have ever been able to measure the impact of their work. Although I am encouraged by small stories of success, I can only hope that in 20 years, the little boys I meet have experimented with respecting the women in their village. I hope so. I beg that you support Cause to Wonder socially and financially. Thank you.”**

is some kind of shaman, witch, or healer. “If you’re a wife beater, you hate it with all your heart,” she says. “If you’re a wife beater who believes in superstition and magic, you *really* hate it. Imagine you are a man in a tribal culture who beats his wife every night. Someone comes through town who does miracles and says, ‘If you want good luck, don’t hit women.’ If you’ve had a bad life, suddenly that’s your fault.”

Menna readily acknowledges that domestic abuse is not a phenomenon isolated to the developing world. With that said, she doesn’t think Cause to Wonder works as well in more developed countries. “Then it’s just a free magic show. It’s a puzzle. The human rights that we need to catch up on in the U.S. and Canada are so different than the places that I go,” she says. People sometimes ask Menna why she doesn’t spread a message about helping men. “The only people who say that are people who live in liberal cultures,” she says, “places where women’s rights are not on the table.”

Cause to Wonder is a bootstrapped effort, and it also benefits from the generosity of a few major sponsors and donations from supporters. “If I don’t get more sponsors eventually, I’m going to use up my retirement,” Menna says. “You know what happens then? Birthday parties. I’m going to go back to birthday parties. If I’m 75 and living in a trailer and doing birthday parties, I’ll be happy as can be. That’ll be just fine.”

Although Menna has loved magic all her life, she seems always to have related to it more as a means to an end. She has used magic

to build her own future, to make art and to sell products, to amuse, entertain, and amaze others, and to make the world a better place. Lately, through Cause to Wonder, she has begun capturing the attention of major players on a global scale. Last year, Menna presented a briefing on Cause to Wonder’s approach for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. She was also the headline performer at the International Labour Organization’s International Women’s Day event, “A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work for All.”

Lisa Menna is a force of nature and she knows it. She is not afraid to speak up for her beliefs, or to speak out against injustices large and small. She knows that she is a talented magician, and she isn’t shy about it. She has successfully unlearned many of the rigid ideals that society teaches us all, those insidious lessons about gender roles and social norms. Thirty years ago, she was busting the boys with chops nobody saw coming. Fifteen years ago, she was ruling the trade show circuit with a deck of cards and a pair of high heels. Today, she is responsible for making a lasting difference in some of the world’s most vulnerable communities, and she does it by disappearing stones and multiplying sponge balls.

Surely Menna’s work will be considered a success if domestic violence declines. She wants to see “helping women brings good things” become a household phrase in India,



Africa, and the Caribbean islands, and all the other regions where Cause to Wonder travels. But the truth is that Menna's magic leaves conversations in its wake and that's worth paying attention to. It stirs up debate, and it instills hope. That evolutionary state of curiosity, that paradigmatic shift that Menna set out to create in the first place is rumbling on some deep, tectonic level. It may take decades for the work she has done to bear fruit in the magic community, in society, and in the world, but maybe wonder, after all, will be what does the trick. •