

THEATRE *of Dreams*

By Tim Pendergast

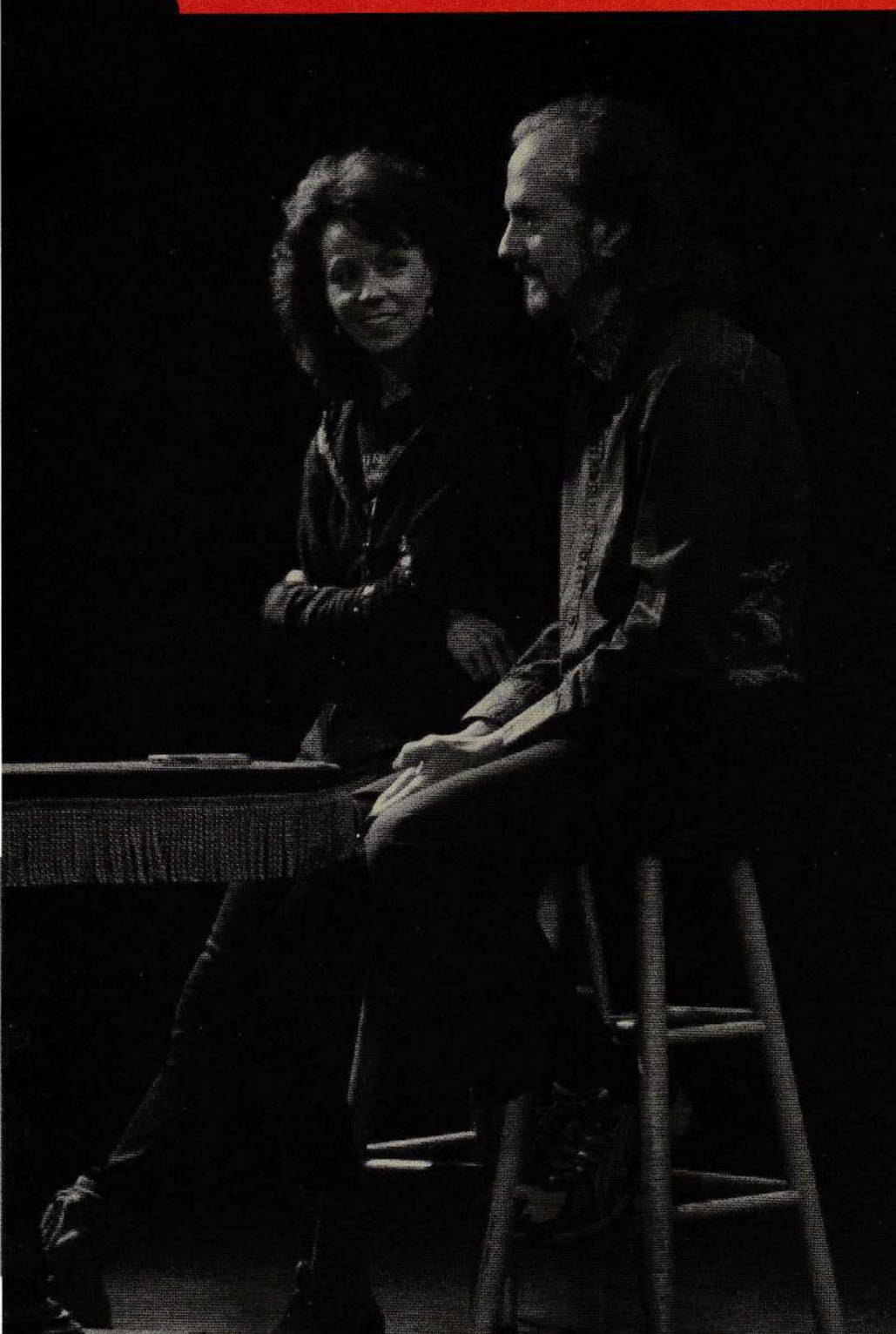
"If you build it, they will come."
— *From the movie*
Field of Dreams

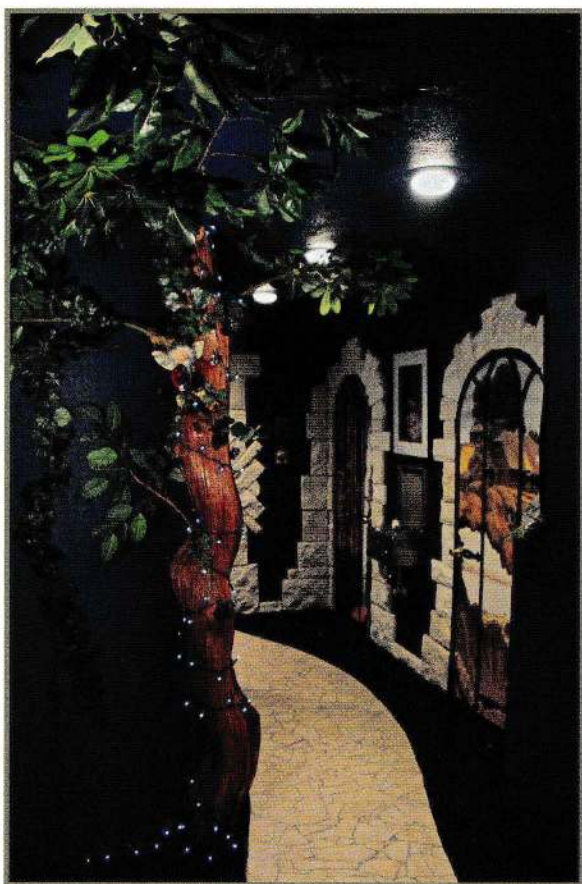
"It takes a lot of courage to pursue your dreams, and make it a reality. Joe and Carol have designed a lovely little theater, a warm and gracious place for the magic to happen."
— *John Carney*

In a small industrial park in Castle Rock, Colorado, people form a line and eagerly await the opening of the doors to a hidden gem. Tonight, the Theatre of Dreams will host yet another show featuring notable names in the magic community. The owners, Joe Givan and Carol Massie, are inside making final preparations for tonight's show. Joe is patiently walking through the order of the show with the featured performer, while Carol diligently goes over the sound and light cues needed to pull off yet another successful performance. The excited people in line arrive as strangers, but many of them will leave as friends. Such is the magic of the Theatre of Dreams.

The first show at the Theatre of Dreams was on March 12, 2003, a private celebration of the opening of the theater, as well as an appreciation of many who contributed countless hours of work in converting what was once a church into a small but elegant 74-seat showplace for magic. The venerable 100-year-old Denver newspaper *Rocky Mountain News* ran the headline "Quite a Trick!" in a weekend cover article, as if to say the prospects were slim for success. After all, a venue featuring magic and mystery entertainers seemed risky at best. Twelve years later, the Theatre of Dreams is still here, while the *Rocky Mountain News* has closed.

The first public performance was on April 4, 2003, and featured Sven Jorgenson. Since then, the list of performers has included some of the top names in the magic world: Dan Sperry, Jon Stetson, Peter Samelson, Gregory Wilson, Marc Salem, Gazzo, Eric Mead, Eric Buss, Fielding West, David & Leeman, Banachek, Stephen Bargatze, Gene Anderson, Paul Draper, Luke Jermy, Bob Sheets, Daniel Garcia, Chris Capehart, Garrett Thomas, Jay Scott Berry,





[Above] The Theatre of Dreams in Castle Rock, Colorado. The formerly bland entryway (left) was transformed with the creation of a garden path, complete with leafy tree. [Facing page] Theatre creators Carol Massie and Joe Givan.

Arthur Trace, Aaron Fisher, Danny Archer, Giovanni Livera, John Carney, Paul Gertner, Shawn Farquhar, Geoff Williams, Mark Strivings, Jeff Hobson — and many others.

Has it been easy? Absolutely not. Joe and Carol reveal that the theater became a dream of theirs soon after they began performing together in 1992.

Appearing as the Dream Masterz, Joe and Carol spent years doing shows in performing arts centers, theaters, and casino showrooms. When their manager passed away in the middle of a big tour, they realized they were tiring of traveling and turned their attention to finding a venue close to home. While sleeping in their own bed at night is nice, Joe is emphatic that the main reason for building the theater was to bring world class magic to people who would probably never have a chance to experience it firsthand.

Joe and Carol first looked twenty miles north, to Denver, to find a space they could purchase. The ability to convert the inside of the space for different events, as well as build illusions into the walls if necessary, made owning the space a priority. Along with the visibility provided in a big city came the problems of parking and zoning. The best location happened to be close to the Denver Broncos' stadium, which presented problems all its own, especially that the

building's ceiling height was prohibitive. After three years of searching, they turned their sights to Castle Rock, their hometown.

Upon finding the space that had previously been a church, the work began. Carol used her experience as a real estate agent to ensure they obtained the space, beating another prospective bidder by two hours. Turning a church into a theater would seem fairly simple, because of the existing footprint being similar, but there were a few wrinkles. Where the tech booth would be located was a ten-foot long baptismal tub, submerged in the floor. As Joe puts it, "The tub was big enough to fully immerse Frankenstein's monster." The ceiling would have to be painted, and molding installed around existing wood beams that were not flush with the ceiling. A scaffold needed for the ceiling became an unexpected expense. The floor of the entryway was not level, as it originally led to two separate businesses. The entryway also was too narrow to permit more than one patron passing at a time, so two walls in the entryway had to be converted.

Joe had consulted the previous owner about one of the front walls being a "load bearing" wall — meaning, if the wall comes

out, the ceiling comes down. After being assured that the wall could be removed, the ceiling started to bow. A metal pole used for bracing ceilings was installed in two days. After installation, it was obvious that the pole was a detriment to the visual appeal when first entering the theater. Enter Jerry Thompson, a retired Air Force Colonel who had just finished remodeling his basement. A tree trunk that was meant to be used for a bar, already stained and varnished, was installed in place of the pole in very little time. Carol states, "I went out for coffee and returned to find a tree in the lobby!" It became a focal point of the visual appeal upon entering.

Knowing that they would need help with the electrical aspect of the process, Joe contacted a retired electrician, Don Haight, who was reputed to be "affordable" and more than competent. Joe reached Don's wife on the phone, only to be told that Don "does not do commercial work." After Joe's pleading with Mrs. Haight to pass the information along, Don surprised them with a visit. He spent three hours crawling around the space above the ceiling, and he returned to say "I think I can help you out." Don proceeded to spend four months and hundreds of hours to help convert the space. During this process, Joe and Carol continually asked for an estimate of cost, getting increasingly nervous as time passed. At completion, Don handed them an invoice for almost



nothing. His "bill" was so insignificant it barely covered materials, with no charge for his labor!

The aforementioned first private show became a coronation: Don was crowned the King of the Theatre of Dreams and given a decorated cardboard crown from Burger King. Those attending were reduced to tears. It was much later that Don, who had moved away from Castle Rock, attended a show featuring Joe and Carol's Dream Masterz act. Don finally saw the fruits of his labor and was "blown away" by the show, as well as the ambiance that he had helped to create.

It should be noted that remodeling originally planned for one month took four months, with no days off. A second mortgage for the theater space was needed. Chairs were obtained from a closing business in Denver, shuttled in stacks down an elevator, and stored in Joe and Carol's living room for four months. The work on the ceiling alone took days. Joe determined that the tile for the entryway needed to be unique, so standard tiles were broken and then reassembled as a mosaic. Carol recalls constructing the tile "puzzle" pathway during a freezing winter as being a low point.

The stage was constructed to be flexible. It can be entirely removed, or reconfigured to be a theater in the round. A wall was constructed along the length of the theater as behind-the-scenes access to the



stage from the tech booth and green room. Offstage left holds props and illusions for use during shows, as there is no backstage. Both side walls can be fitted with illusions if needed. For now, the showroom walls are adorned with framed paintings highlighted by spotlights. The wood-beamed ceiling is painted dark blue, resembling a night sky. Chandeliers provide lighting for the audience, while the stage is adorned with full stage lighting. Speakers are unobtrusive, adding to the living room-like environment. In addition to the tech booth, stage, and seating area, there are two restrooms, the lobby, and two dressing rooms.

Another obstacle faced by Joe and Carol was convincing the town of Castle Rock that



The theater interior (top left), transformed from a church worship hall (right). Carol works the tech booth. Joe onstage, working for a typically packed house. [Facing page] The Dream Masterz stage a publicity shot outside their Theatre of Dreams.

they needed a venue providing world class entertainment. Joe was given a heads up by one of the council members that they would be "put through the wringer" when presenting their case for a theater. The space is situated in an industrial park directly across the street from a residential area. Noise, lighting, parking, and hours of operation were all going to be an issue. To make things worse, a well-funded developer was also try-



ing to convince the town to build a 24-hour convenience store and fast food business in the same area, which caused numerous delays for Joe and Carol to present their case. After many hours preparing answers to the questions they assumed would be asked, they watched with increasing trepidation as the council repeatedly shot down the developer about conditions that they had anticipated for the theater. After presenting their case, with some of the same conditions that the developer had asked for, they were immediately approved!

Other struggles have presented themselves since opening. With zero marketing budget, Joe and Carol rely on word-of-mouth advertising. This is accomplished in two ways. Theater attendees are encouraged to leave their email addresses in a guest book in the lobby. Notices of upcoming shows are sent out, which Carol says then get forwarded to attendees' friends and family. Also, at every show since the beginning, guests are recruited as "ambassadors" for the theater. They are asked to spread the word around the community. This has been key to the theater's continued success.

Is every show a sellout? It's tough to sell out shows on a frequent schedule, so shows become a special event when they occur. Luckily, they have sold out almost every show in the last four years. Sometimes, they still have to "sweat it out" until the last minute for ticket sales. With 300 days of sunshine per year in Colorado, people tend to wait until the weekend to plan. During the economic crisis, an email was sent to past attendees practically begging them to

support the theater to allow it to continue. There are still times when their nerves get on edge, hoping that people will attend; however, it's part of owning a theater.

There was talk at the beginning of having a concession area in the front, but along with selling food and drinks comes liability, needed space, and employees. Although it could have helped bring in revenue, it just wasn't viable. However, food and beverages are allowed for private dinner parties, with tables onsite for food service. Joe states that the theater was never envisioned as a big money-making endeavor, but it does "advertise" their Dream Masterz illusion show for other bookings and income.

The theater is open year 'round, with public shows generally twice a month on weekends. Tickets are \$22.50. While Joe and Carol still travel and perform, they are fortunate to be able to book theater shows around their professional schedule. They have had "guest hosts," but many theater patrons are repeat customers and have come to expect Joe and Carol's friendly, gracious treatment. The feeling of being invited to someone's home for a show has contributed a large part to the theater's success. Joe and Carol also make the venue available for private rental and events, along with occasional special shows such as a "séance and ghost walk" and Murder Mystery Dinners.

Most shows feature one performer for approximately 75 minutes; the Dream Masterz themselves perform at their theater two weekends a year. Since video projection is available, some performers augment their normal show with a close-up set, which has proven to be very popular.

If anyone is considering following in Joe and Carol's footsteps, they offer a few words of caution. Good credit is needed. Experience performing and managing is paramount. Attention to detail is most crucial, as well as an ability to work well with the public. Marketing experience helps, and in the case of Theatre of Dreams, an ability to do much of the remodeling is required. This type of endeavor is not for everyone. Things that attendees aren't aware of include the sweeping of floors, cleaning bathrooms, managing ticket sales and seating, as well as many other ancillary duties. Carol jokes that she is the marketing department and tech crew, as well as the janitor, while Joe is the maintenance man and talent booker.

Joe and Carol admit that several times during the remodeling process, they both said "We must be insane!" However, upon

completion, they both stood in the sound booth and broke into tears. They then blasted the music, turned on the stage lights, and danced together for an hour. Joe and Carol insist that the longevity and success of the theater is because of the high caliber of performers they bring onstage. "Every show has to be a home run," says Joe. "When we say 'world class,' we mean it, and that's what our patrons have come to expect."

Has it paid off? Upon entering the theater, one is transported to another world. Peter Samelson says, "Walking in, past the twisted tree, along the cobbled lane, you enter a theater so intimate and well equipped that you understand that you *have* to do your best show — ever. The audience has come to expect quality and the pressure is on. Not from Carol and Joe, who make you feel like a treasured jewel, but rather from wanting to be the best act you can be, and to have that audience leave talking about you and wanting you to come back."

Other performers agree, and their comments say much about the quality of the experience. Banachek says, "Theatre of Dreams is just that — a beautiful theater created by two people with a dream and a steady, never-ending stream of passion for our art. Joe and Carol are truly heroes in our magic world." Arthur Trace says, "Carol and Joe are not only fine performers and great hosts, but they also make you feel like family. I've performed at the Theatre of Dreams twice now and it's one of my favorite intimate venues to perform in." And Stephen Bargaetze calls the venue "a perfect place to perform. Not only were the audiences great, but Joe and Carol are superb doing sound and lights. They also warmed up the crowd for me." Bargaetze echoes Trace's sentiment: "They made me feel like family."

At first, it was a struggle to convince top performers to give up a weekend to make less money than they are accustomed to, but as performers experienced the theater, they told other performers about this hidden gem. Now there's a wait list of performers who are eager to appear on the venue's stage.

If you are anywhere near Castle Rock, Colorado, you could not do better than to plan a visit to the Theatre of Dreams. **M**

Tim Pendergast is a semi-professional magician residing in Fort Collins, Colorado, where he was one of the organizers of Magic in the Rockies. He is a member of IBM Ring 250 and SAM Assembly 292.