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MARIO MARCHESE:

Magic's Punk Rock Peter Pan Philosopher

By Chloe Olewitz

"Maker magician" doesn't really capture the ethos of Mario Marchese. He's a magician, sure, and he's an active member of the global maker movement. He's a kids' magician fighting the stigma of kids' magic, he's a top-tier professional who refuses to step out of his ripped jeans to fit in for a show at the country club. Mario hasn't been a hitchhiker for twenty years, but he keeps a '71 Volkswagen bus in his family's driveway to remind him of the road. Yes, his magic show is full of homemade robots and widgets. But Mario is more than a maker magician; he's a punk rock Peter Pan put on this planet with a purpose.

A high-school aged Mario left New York behind to embark on a cross-country hitchhiking adventure with nothing but a backpack and his dog, Cloudkicker, at his heels. He was obsessed with music and dedicated to figuring it all out as he went along. He shared the open road with more American youth who had ditched the college-job-marriage-house-kids trajectory for a chance to see what lived out there beyond the straight-and-narrow American dream we've all been sold. "I didn't worry about money," Mario says. "I didn't worry about anything. It was just me and Cloudkicker. Then the magic thing hit me so hard. I had never fallen in love with something so deeply. I couldn't sleep at night. All I thought about was magic."

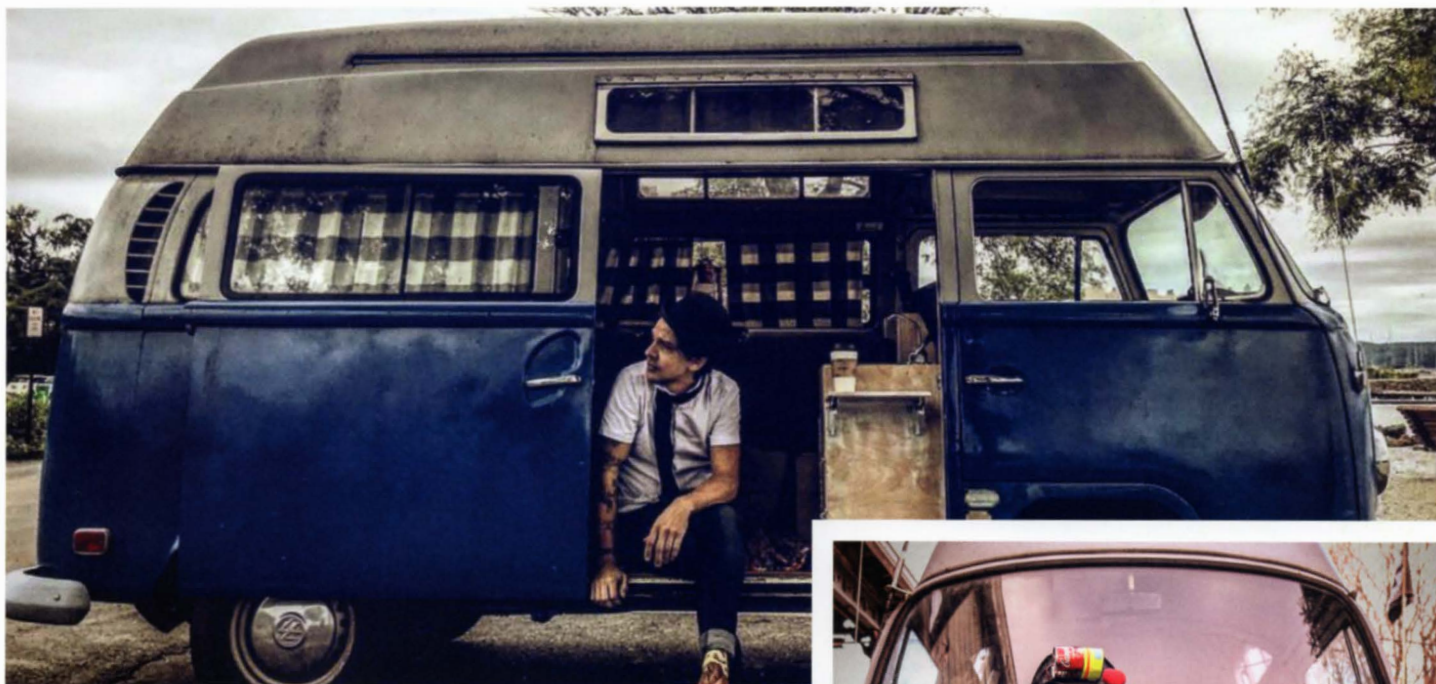
Mario first found magic in Michigan. He was 23 years old when he stumbled into Hippy Hop Magic Shop in Grand Rapids in 2002, and he saw an omen in spotting his favorite scene from his favorite movie playing on a beat-up television set at the back of the room — it was the food fight in *Hook*. Shop owners

Jim and Michelle Parkes showed Mario the basics of magic and introduced him to the local club. He stuck around for a few hours, then he stayed for two years.

The Parkeses taught Mario the core principles of magic, breaking down complete routines to their fundamental elements so he could better understand why the classics of magic work the way they do. Reverse engineering routines made sense to the young punk rocker: it was just like songwriting. "When you want to play an instrument, you start by covering your favorite songs. You learn structure, you learn verse, chorus, bridge. When you understand why those things exist in a song, you can start understanding how to write your own."

It didn't hurt that Mario first started learning from Michigan's magical greats; he had landed in Grand Rapids because of a girlfriend whose grandfather's best friend happened to be Gene Anderson. Gene taught Mario classic effects and routines in monthly four-hour lessons, starting with Whit Haydn's four-ring routine. "Gene was super patient with me. He taught it to me step by step, putting up with my punk rock rebelliousness. Then he practically gave me the rings. He knew I had no money so he sold them to me for \$50 or something. I still have those rings."

Upon returning to New York at age 24, Mario spent a year in his parents' house trying to figure out what to do next. Reflecting on that period of his life, he says he felt like he had lost everything. But what Mario really lost was time. That'll happen when you head out on the road to see what magic you can find. He started from scratch, putting together a life that had only just occurred to him, while all around him, his New York friends had



Mario Marchese, along with some of the robotic partners he has created, posing with Little Blue Bus, the 1971 VW that symbolizes his family's freedom, non-conformity, and adventure.

graduated from college and were well on their way down the paths that had been laid out for them by tradition. The "I want to be a magician" theme with which Mario had reentered his old life wasn't exactly a tune his peers could sing along to.

All the while, Mario had been dreaming up the future of his magic career. He was ambitious and excited. He was going to be the next David Copperfield, the next David Blaine. But shortly before he left Michigan, Mario's dream had morphed into something new. A revelation manifested in the only way the truth can appear to a Lost Boy: as a dream. "I was performing in the basement of a church in front of all these kids. I was so happy in the dream. It was a big circle of happiness and laughter. When I woke up, I thought it was so strange; I didn't want to be a kids' magician. I had all these ambitions, and a lot of magicians have this thing against kids' magic. It's like if you're doing kids' shows, you're not doing magic shows."

Up until that point, Mario had been performing at open mics and on late night stages in front of all-adult audiences, and it wasn't going very well. "I couldn't find myself," he says. "I wasn't having any fun. I think sometimes

you're supposed to face your fears and become something better, but sometimes things just aren't going to happen if you keep fighting. I had to let go. It was this powerful thing, just saying there's nothing wrong with a children's birthday party."

Even early on, Mario had already been indoctrinated into the kind of thinking that has magicians turning up their noses at kids' magic; not everyone can be Silly Billy. The stigma had seeped into his consciousness, latent and insidious, until he had that dream in Michigan. In an alternate ending to the story, this type of bias could easily have derailed Mario, condemning him to a lifetime of mediocre grown-up magic. It's not an unfamiliar tale. But Mario wasn't going down that road.

"That dream made me realize where my heart is. I am here to elevate another human being. It's a human being that's a lot younger than everyone else; does that mean that it's not as valuable? No. To me, it's even more valuable. My goal is to bring something of rich value to



children, entertainment-wise, instead of something you just throw together because it's a kids' show."

But emerging from the unbridled possibility of hitchhiking through Neverland into the stone-cold reality of life in Westchester was a shock to Mario's system. He got a job as a teacher's aide for kids with disabilities in Yorktown Heights, New York. In evenings and on weekends, he followed the big dream. Mario took all the gigs his magician friends turned down, which more often than not ended up being kids' birthday parties. After two years, he found that he was more than paying his rent, and it wasn't from his teacher's aide salary. Mario was making



PHOTO: ROEY YOHAI PHOTOGRAPHY

Mario in the early days, performing crystal ball manipulation. [Left] Marcel the Mechanical Monkey was Mario's first robotic creation.

it as a kids' magician. And along the way, he was finding himself.

"The thing that I was running away from was the very reason I exist. It's why I'm alive. The thing I thought I didn't want was the thing I needed most. My whole purpose in life is to entertain kids, to make them feel inspired and happy and make them laugh as much as I can for the short amount of time that I'm onstage. I didn't realize that until I lost everything. But first I needed that journey to get all that noise, chaos, rebellion, punk rock out of my system. Then I was left with just me in the silence."

Along the way, Mario had crossed paths with fellow adventurer Katie

job as the showroom coordinator for a high-end kitchen company in SoHo. Now she says she thrives under the behind-the-scenes pressure of running the company, managing and marketing Mario's talent, and building what has become a family business. It's been twelve years since they both quit their jobs to go all in on Mario the Magician.

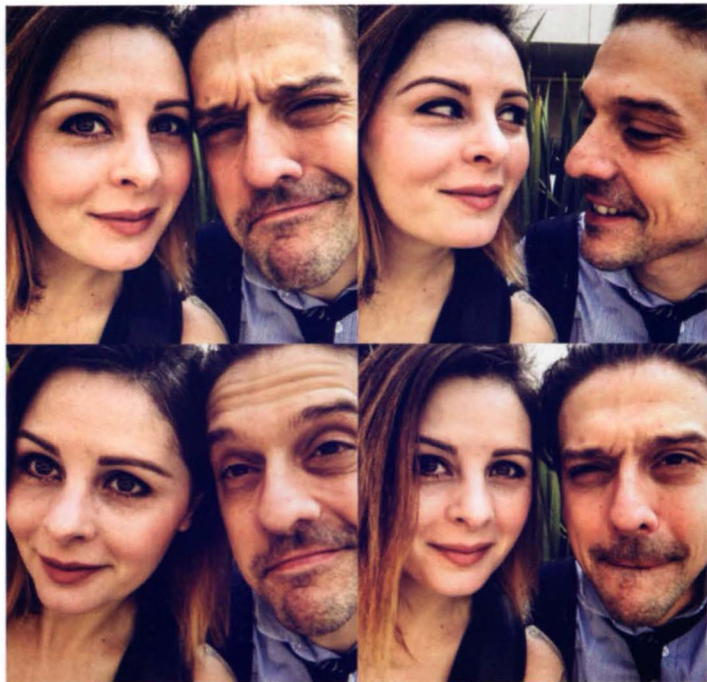
"Katie literally built the stage under my feet," Mario says. "She turned it into a business and made it into something way bigger than I ever could have."

At his first job, working in a flower shop in Mamaroneck at age fifteen, Mario learned about shape and presentation, about crafting beauty out of the highs and lows of every stem and bloom

that came together to make an arrangement. Then his high school teacher, Ms. Renello, opened his eyes to color and form and space, to painting, wood-carving, and puppet-making. Fast forward to 2005, a year into Mario's starting from scratch at his parents' place in New York. He picked up *Make Magazine* at a local Barnes & Noble and immediately built a cigar box guitar from the issue's instructions. The skill was already there at the tips of his nimble fingers.

Through *Make Magazine*, Mario started to become active in the wider maker movement. It wasn't long before he fell down the rabbit hole of Arduino, the credit-card sized programmable microcontroller that has taken industries — from DIY crafts to robotics — by storm in recent years. He stayed up for days learning code and immersing himself in all things programming. "It changed my life just like magic changed my life. I couldn't sleep at night."

He spent months trying to make his first servomotor move. Then through trial and error and constant problem solving, Mario started to get the hang of Arduino programming. He discovered that the maker movement in general and Arduino programming in particular are both completely reliant on open source information. Mario credits all



Mario, the magician, and Katie Roso Marchese, the manager, marketer, and off-stage partner.



Gigi, Katie, Moria, and Bear always travel together for Mario's shows. As they say, "It's a family business."

his programming knowledge to the open source community and to the makers and developers whose publicly available work helped him get his start. But the open source mindset stands in direct opposition to much of the predominant thinking in the magic world, where secrets are a currency and trust is at a premium.

To Mario, this attitude is backward. He sees sharing knowledge as the responsibility of every artist. He has taken to heart an offhand comment he once read online: "Life isn't a race, it's a relay." Mario is clear that no contemporary magic can be isolated from the magic that was created yesterday or yesteryear. He does his part to pay it forward, regularly taking kids under his wing, whether he finds them at Maker Faires or magic conventions, guiding their journeys or inviting them to open for his show. At the same time, he goes out of his way to acknowledge the giants on whose shoulders he stands; while working Magi-Fest in 2018, Mario saw Gene Anderson across the room. He stood up on a chair to call to Gene in front of every convention attendee within earshot: "Gene Anderson! These are the rings you gave me. You took the time for me."

Even though making has always

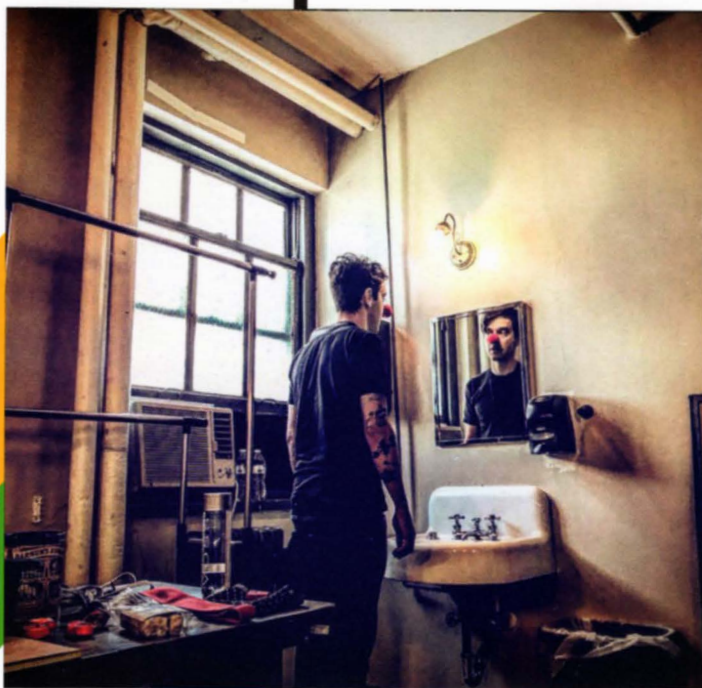
been a part of Mario's life, the "maker" moniker hasn't always factored into the Mario the Magician equation. In his early robotic projects, Mario built drawing machines out of recycled printers and computers and showcased at galleries in Brooklyn. He wasn't making a dime, and he still considered visual art and magic shows to be entirely unrelated endeavors. At the time, his show was focused on kids' classics like Hippy Hop Rabbits, Strat-O-Sphere, and a Die Box routine. But when a parent left Mario's show disappointed one day, the criticism cut deep. It forced him to reevaluate: "I realized I couldn't just do store-bought tricks and expect people to feel like they were seeing something worthwhile. I decided that every talent I've honed over the years, they all have to be in my show somehow."

He set to restructuring his show from the ground up, bringing together classics of magic, punk rock stylings, and his love for vaudeville, all wrapped up in a DIY maker effort that spanned from fashion design to robotics. He built a show opener that relies on fourteen servomotors causing the signs and decorations on his Suitcase Machine to dance and hang and fall. He designed a military-inspired jacket with epaulettes that fly off and decorated his vest with

flowers that spin seemingly on their own. "When people ask what I do for a living, I say I build electronics that fall apart on purpose to make kids laugh."

Slowly, the Arduino-powered accents originally designed to complement his onstage antics became fully automated robots that help Mario with his magic. There's Mr. Lamp, who looks like a garage-built version of Pixar's anthropomorphic desk light, and there's the Card Machine that eats cards and spits them up again, dancing and wiggling to divine audience selections. Marcel the Mechanical Monkey is Mario's first and favorite robot, and even though Marcel has seniority in Mario's robot suite, he still doesn't do a single magic trick: "It's three minutes of theater. I'm trying to convince Marcel to put a ball in a can. I love how that routine evolved, taking all these old ventriloquist bits from vaudeville and adapting them into robotics. But I don't have a puppet I'm animating — it's animating itself."

The pillars of the maker movement also anchor the way Mario hopes to influence kids, inspiring them to be resourceful and open-minded. He uses the homemade bottle cap award ribbon he wears on his vest to demonstrate that everything kids are seeing is within their reach, no matter who they are or



A reflective moment while on tour with the David Blaine show last year.



Mario regales the crowd at a Maker Faire in Guadalajara, Mexico.

where they come from. "I never won an award doing magic but I'm a maker, so I made my own award," Mario says in his show. Once, at a show in Youngstown, Ohio, a young juggler Mario had met at a local Maker Faire showed up wearing his own homemade bottle cap award ribbon on his vest. "That killed me," Mario says. "If I had some fancy magic prop, a big illusion or something... this resonated with him and he could go home and build it. That's why I do this."

The power of accessibility isn't just a sellable life lesson, it's a truth Mario lives every day. Neither Mario nor Katie graduated from college, and they both feel it's important to demonstrate that institutionalized higher education isn't the only way to be successful in life. Mario balks when he sees kids who feel limited by their parents' economic status. "The traditional path of education is not the only way to get educated," he says. Mario has lectured and performed at Maker Faires from Fredonia, New York to Shenzhen, China with this message in the spotlight. At Maker Faires, he tips the insides of his hat and his suitcase: "There's hot glue, there's tape, and there's the Arduino."

This maker mentality runs in Mario's blood as a legacy he has inherited and will pass on. Mario's late grandfather

and namesake was a tailor, and on a recent trip to Italy, Mario's grandmother handed over one of the handmade suits that Mario Senior had crafted for himself long ago. "I look at that thing and I'm like, *Damn! Talk about maker.* There's this whole DNA thing, a genetic thing I believe in where we are a part of our past." Mario Junior's handmade animated-epaulette jacket shines in a whole new light.

On that same trip, Mario's two children met their great-grandmother for the first time. Seven-year-old Gigi is a maker in her own right, while four-year-old Bear is taking quickly to magic and performance — Mario says he's a ham onstage. When Mario's magic takes him on national and international tours, the Marcheses travel as a family. Mario wants to show Gigi and Bear that it's not only possible to follow your dreams, but that staying true to yourself, no matter how far off the beaten track you roam, can be a viable career path.

"Do you know how good it felt to walk into Mohonk Mountain House or these really fancy, established places wearing ripped jeans and my punk rock mess? That's the greatest feeling in the world. I'm trying to make my kids feel that freedom I felt when I was hitchhiking, when I was traveling. The ultimate

goal is happiness, and to me happiness derives from having that freedom."

Trusting his truest self-expression has worked out well so far. In 2017, Mario spent two and a half months opening for David Blaine's North American tour. The two first met in New York, when Mario was hired to entertain the kids at Robert De Niro's son's birthday party while David played for the adults. "I set up my little table and the kids were getting loud. People were complaining. Then all of a sudden, Robert De Niro turns around, then his wife, and they're all watching the little lamp. They're all watching Marcel the Monkey. They're in it. It was amazing. There was nothing I could do wrong; everything came out perfect."

Mario says it was one of the most memorable moments of his life. Two weeks later, he got the call to join Blaine's brain trust and consult on the tour. They started working together, "making stuff," and as David got to know Mario's talent he started booking him to play for kids as far as Paris, France. Then on Blaine's tour, Mario brought fifteen kids onstage every night, entertaining them as a sort of show within a show while audiences of 4,000 watched on from their stadium seats.

"David is such an inspiring person,"



Mario entertaining thousands onstage on the David Blaine tour, and performing for the cameras with Murray Monster while taping an episode of Sesame Street.



Mario says. "He can do a show in front of 4,000 people with 95 percent of his show in his pockets. And entertain. And kill. That hit me really hard because I was like that when I first got into magic, the whole 'everything fits into your backpack' kind of thing. But now with the robots, I get crazy." Bigger robots mean more luggage, not to mention figuring out how to pass TSA security checkpoints with a suitcase full of servomotors, lithium batteries, and metal parts.

That all started to change when, leading up to the tour, David issued Mario a life-changing challenge: work from your pockets, no robots allowed. The task left Mario simultaneously flustered and inspired. But he knew David was taking a risk, and Mario wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to rise to the occasion. Accepting David's challenge helped Mario develop his career from a practical perspective and juiced up his magic from an artistic angle. He learned a powerful lesson: "You have to be passionate about your vision, but flexible about the details."

Mario says David often called him "the new Buster Keaton" and encouraged him to dig into his gold mine of physical comedy bits, the parts of his act that were packed full of pure

potential but had been relinquished to the off beats. "It was terrifying, but it freed me so much. David let me spread my wings and figure out my place in it all. How much magic can I do before I get to my table? What can I do with my shoelace, my hat, my cane?"

David's no-robots challenge forced Mario to isolate his innate talent and work his comedy chops, instead of neglecting his gift by leaning too hard on a crutch called Arduino. Bill Irwin and George Carl are some of Mario's lifelong heroes, so the light flooded in immediately once David pried open the door. The results are manifest in Mario's show today; now he can work for fifteen minutes before even opening his Suitcase Machine. He steps onstage missing one of his shoelaces, and builds a full routine out of finding a new one. It vanishes and reappears, changes color, and ends up tied onto his shoe where it belongs.

Getting his costume together is a strong storyline for Mario's no-robots opening sequence. When he realizes he has forgotten his tie, he plucks one

out of a balloon. He turns a piece of torn newspaper into a handkerchief, which attaches itself magically to his vest, right there next to the bottle cap award ribbon. His top hat is shiny in all the right places and a punk rock kind of worn in (not to mention packed with tech), and getting the hat onto his head is a bit in itself. Mario has clearly drawn from the canon of physical comedy and clowning that he has idolized for decades — the hat is upside down, the hat is hooked on his toe, the hat is stuck on one end of his cane and then the other, always dancing, always just out of reach. Eventually, he uses the hat to produce streamers and confetti and a white dove named Mozzarella.



A few of Mario's creations, including the bottle cap award ribbon he crafted. [Left] An outdoors show at Madison Square Park in New York City.

Mario's reappearing clown nose routine — it's on his vest, it's behind his ear, it's multiplying, they're tucked into the frames of his glasses, they're clipped to the brim of his hat — lasts for more than three minutes and it absolutely kills. "That's my heart and soul," Mario says. "It works in every situation. I can do that in front of 4,000 people and it'll still hold its own. That's the kind of magic I'm trying to create now."

Mario loves magic and he loves making. But at his core, Mario wants to be an artist. Call what he does engineering or call it clowning or call it a magic trick, the blurring of those lines is less important to him than the impact his art can have on the lives of

the kids crawling around on the floor in front of him. Kids' magician stigma and stereotypes be damned, the medium certainly won't be what stops Mario from making art out of whatever is in front of him. While Mario's faith is clearly one of his main drivers, he doesn't like to talk about the specifics of his beliefs. And he doesn't think the belief system itself matters much to the gifts he wants to give to the world, lessons like putting your trust in something bigger than yourself and offering up your talents with humility. "I used to pray my guts out to the universe the night before my birthday parties. Like God, Universe, Buddha, whoever, please, this is all I've got. I have to kill 35 minutes and my material only lasts 10. When I put that vulnerability to the universe through my faith and what I believe in, I watched cosmic things happen. And I would make it through."

The days of stretching out ten minutes of material are long behind Mario. He has appeared on *Sesame Street* and NBC Sprout channel (now

Universal Kids). He worked with Best Children's Album Grammy winner Tim Kubart, played *The Magic Castle* for the first time this January, and has lectured across the country at magic clubs, maker events, and kids' performer conventions. *Building Magic*, Mario's six-minute short film take on a sizzle reel, has since grown into a full-length documentary all about Mario and his magical maker family. For now, finding distribution for the film is on the Marcheses' back burner.

These accomplishments and accolades may be meaningful to Mario, but they are not the point. When he talks about success, he is emotional and humble and maybe even a little anxious, like he's afraid he might wake up one morning to discover it was all a dream. How long can Peter Pan's Neverland magic last in the real world? How long can a Lost Boy wish upon his rising star? For Mario, the only answer is to cultivate a constant state of gratitude and relate to success as an inherent acknowledgment of vulnerability. Success devoid of humility does not compute.

So long as he can focus on bettering the life of a child, on helping kids believe in the magic all around them and inspiring them to reach out and grab onto that magic for themselves, he

POTO: KATIE MARCHESE



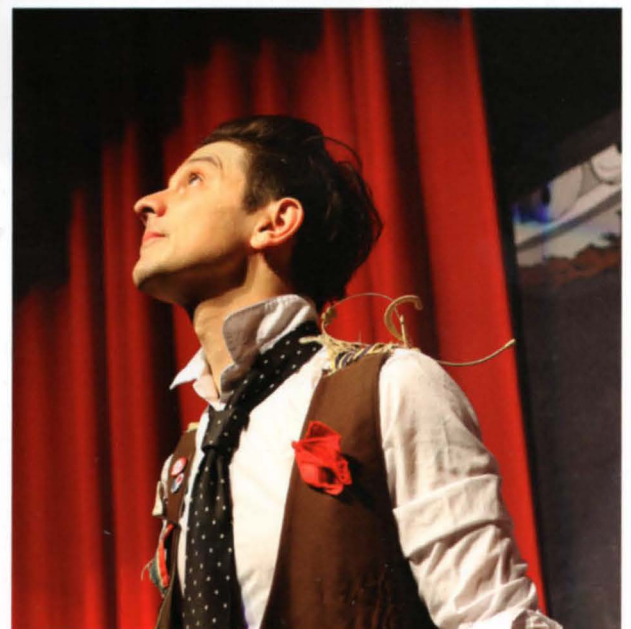
Onstage, Mario exudes energy, exuberance, and passion for his work.

doesn't have to worry about climbing the ladder of fame or toppling the hierarchy of performance styles. That's not what Mario's here for.

"I'm not here to make money. I'm not here to become famous. I'm not here to do anything but what's in front of me. If that's a group of kids in a living room, then I'm going to rock it out like it's Carnegie Hall. When I first started magic, I would never dream that I would be onstage with David Blaine doing magic for kids. It was the opposite of everything that made sense to me. Having moments like that really made me feel like maybe I'm doing all right. Maybe it's all right." ✨



PHOTO: PATRICK HUGHES



Look here for videos of Mario the Maker Magician, including a "sneak peek" as he prepares and performs shows in a variety of venues, and a magic routine with the robotic Mr. Lamp.

See more videos of Mario and his family at www.mariothemagician.com.