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ALL DECKED OUT Professional magicians Robert Charles and Benjamin Barnes are well suited for *Magic Chicago*.

Tricks of the trade

Can *Magic Chicago* pull some respect out of its hat? By Greg Presto

In 1950, as many as 100 magicians met every day at Frick's restaurant at Dearborn and Washington Streets. For 15-year-old Eugene Burger, sitting at the meeting dubbed Frick's Roundtable was a chance to get close to the famed magicians who performed at Chicago's illustrious nightspots: Don Alan, star of the now-defunct Edgewater Beach Hotel, would wow the crowd with a cups and balls set; Bert Allerton could make a card appear out of an aspirin tin at the Pump Room; Matt Schulien, who owned a tavern at Halsted and Willow Streets, pulled card tricks with a big German personality. The scene was a performer's paradise: plenty of work for magicians and downtown throngs salivating for shows.

The days of Frick's Roundtable, and the allure of Chicago's live magic, faded in the 1970s. Until now. Two local magicians, Benjamin Barnes and Robert Charles, started a series of shows called *Magic Chicago* in 2005, partly inspired by the teachings of Burger—now one of the last living

magicians of the golden age. The monthly show aims to build community among the city's 50-or-so pros—and perhaps bring back the magic of the old days. Card-wranglers, mind readers, magic legends and their fans meet the first Wednesday of each month at the second-floor room in the Edgewater Presbyterian Church (1020 W Bryn Mawr Ave at Kenmore Ave).

"The 1950s were, I suppose, the heyday of Chicago magic," says Burger, who somehow fared well during the city's magic slump, publishing more than 20 books and DVDs on illusionism, and taking aspiring magicians under his wing. Today, *Magic Chicago* rejuvenates that 1950s sense of wonder and rabbit-in-cap community—while adding a modern twist.

"We do a lot of outreach to bring in people who aren't necessarily into magic, as well as different types of performers," says Barnes, who, in addition to producing the show, practices primarily sleight-of-hand magic—using props like cards and coins coupled who performs various illusory means like misdirection—to entertain at corporate functions and cocktail parties. The 31-year-old wants performances to include more than smoke and mirrors. "We had a

guy who caught paintballs in his mouth, mentalists, mind-readers, all sorts of stuff. I really try to go for diversity," Barnes says.

The 60-seat shows aren't David Copperfield affairs: The space is intimate enough that the audience can view simple sleight-of-hand, and comfortable enough that performers can pluck assistants and reactions from the audience with ease.

"We had a guy who caught paintballs in his mouth."

The Wednesday 3 installment is especially notable because Burger will perform. Barnes says he sees Burger as a philosopher who teaches performers to use magic as a form of artistic self-expression, with tricks as a medium to articulate who they are. The opening act is Dennis Watkins, the writer behind the House Theatre's current touted production *The Magnificents*. His crowd-pleasers range from close-up card tricks to the old sawed-in-half assistant act. For his part, Burger's planning to contact a few restless spirits onstage. "Don't forget the month," he quips. "It is

October, you know."

In the future, Barnes and Charles would like to see a magic-only theater venue for the company. Burger envisions the theater hosting a weekly show akin to New York's 12-year-old *Monday Night Magic* and Boston's *Mystery Lounge*, where performers test-drive new material between heavy-hitting acts—"ham-hocking" in showman-speak.

"Magic, for most magicians, has turned and run the route of corporate gigs," says Watkins, who is both a performer and playwright. "The opportunities for public performances are hard to come by."

Until the show can go weekly or site-specific, *Magic Chicago*'s own roundtable of talent will continue to amaze a mere 12 times a year. Or maybe more: During an interview for this story, Burger performs a card trick over the phone. He instructs me to write down a card, and I choose the three of hearts. He puts the receiver down and shuffles, then plucks a lone card from the deck. As I sit in my living room, he tells me his choice: The three of hearts.

Eugene Burger performs at Magic Chicago Wednesday 3. See listings.

PHOTO: BEN COLE