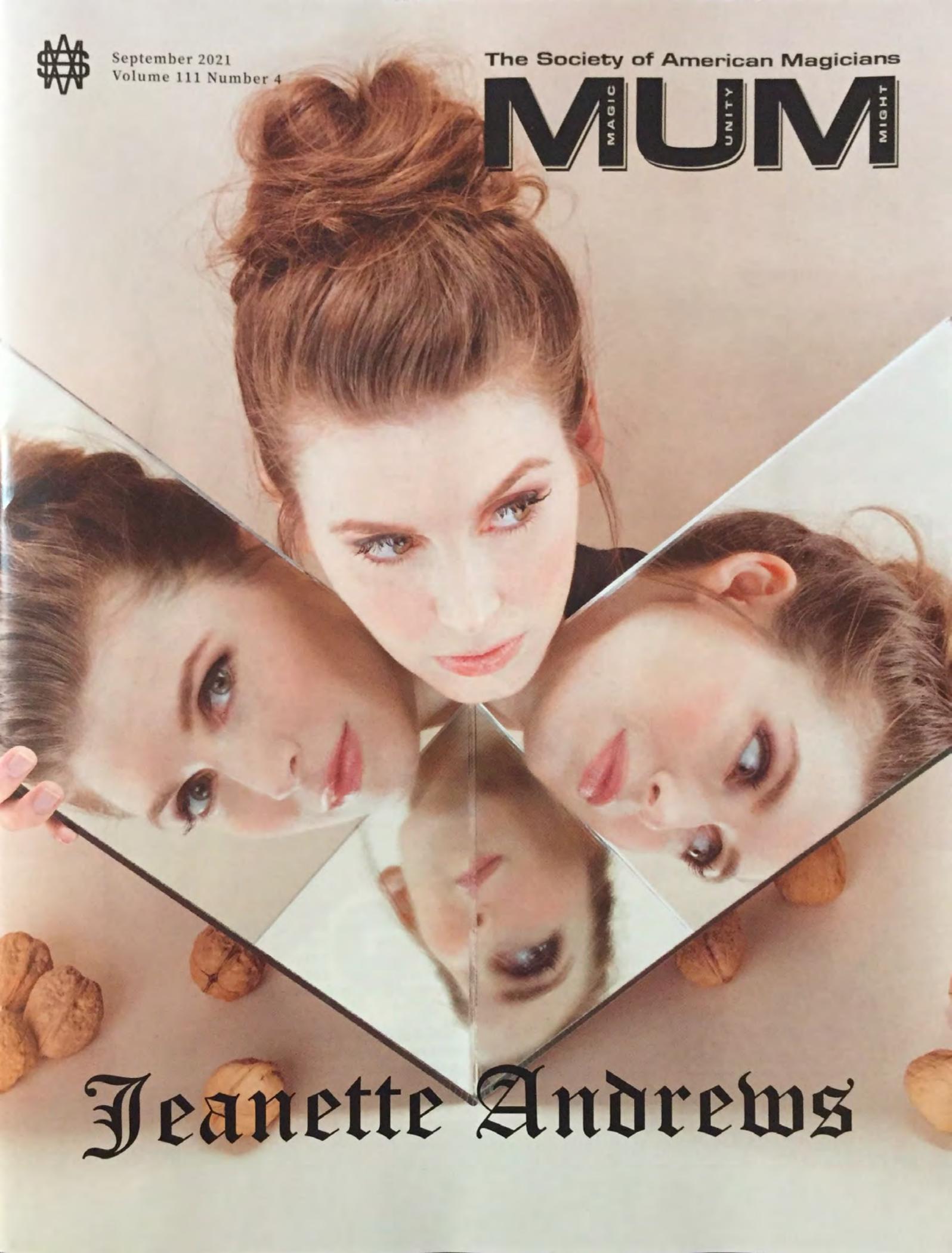




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Jeanette Andrews

Jeanette Andrews — Sounds of Success

By Jaq Greenspon

Magic, by its very nature, is a visual art form. One of the most common plots out there is to vanish an object and make it reappear somewhere else. Or to visually destroy it only to have that object restored to its original condition, no worse the wear for its travel through the stages of dissolution. More importantly, all of these things happen in front of our eyes, phenomenon we can observe from our seats while the performer is on a stage or thousands of miles away through our TV sets or Zoom links.

But what if that paradigm were to shift? What if instead of merely *observing* the magical effect, we wanted to become more intimately involved with it? What if we had to get more up close and personal and use senses other than our vision?

The answer, of course, is: we'd call Jeanette Andrews.

Andrews, who has been a performing magician for literally as long as she can remember, started playing around with senses other than vision several years ago and found it taking her in new and fascinating directions. Then again, you'd expect no less from someone whose conversation is peppered with scientific jargon, references to

European art and cultural icons, and a love of philosophy.

"I got interested in working with scent in a very roundabout and unexpected way," she explains, her mind wandering back to 2013. "I was doing research for a show that I was working on about the five senses. It was just blanketly going to be on the five senses." She knew the visual side of things was well covered, obviously, and she'd already been experimenting with ideas for aural effects, so that left only three. "Primarily, I was looking into taste, scent, and touch and going, *Okay, what are things I can do here?*"

Unexpectedly, this research into the lesser-known senses kept pulling her deeper into the rabbit hole. Ultimately, taste and touch fell back and it was primarily her nose that kept pulling her forward. "I just got really, really drawn into researching scent because I knew almost nothing about it. Every single thing I kept reading and kept finding was just more interesting than the last in terms of how your sense of smell works, how it works in the brain, how, of course, all the obvious things and how it ties in with memory."

This is the point in the conversation when you



learn something about Jeanette Andrews: She knows a lot of stuff and, more importantly, she loves sharing it. Now that our conversation has turned to scent, she shares more cool little nuggets of information, like how the cultural differences in the smell applied to cleaning products in one country can be the same flavoring used in chewing gum in another, comparing it to "Pine-Sol flavored gum."

"That would be so gross," she realizes, her voice getting a little faster in her excitement. "There's just so much in terms of how the brain processes that," she explains. "How it interplays with our sense of taste, that with some foods, the vast majority of what you believe you're tasting is actually retro-nasal olfaction. You're actually smelling up through the back of your mouth and throat! So, there's just a lot in terms of the mechanics of it, that's quite interesting."

The "interesting" part, though, went way beyond just learning some cool facts. As she shared this knowledge, what she discovered was that everyone she talked to wanted to talk back, to share their own experiences with smells. Which is precisely the moment when the performer part of her brain kicks in. "That's when I kind of went,

Okay, I think there's a lot more that can and should be explored here in terms of pieces that I should be working on."

And the work began. Andrews began spending hours and hours a day pouring over magical history, spending as much time as she could doing research on [redacted] using the search parameters of "has there been much done historically with scent and magic?" or "are there types of effects that lend themselves well to working in this?"

"And the answer," she points out, is a resounding "no."

Turns out, the answer was going to be much more complicated than she first thought. "You actually get into some very, very difficult psychology in terms of working with scent that's very nuanced," she continues. "The biology of how you perceive scent is very different than working in a visual field." She goes on to talk about aerosols you can't see and how visual confirmation is used to complete the effect, all of which leads to the idea that ultimately, she was "trying to research types of effects that I thought could potentially be adapted to be working on that and then try to create and adapt from there."

In the end, the result is a piece, part of her show

Thresholds, that literally cannot be described on paper, but which needs to be experienced in person to fully understand its impact and resonance with a lay audience.

For a woman who states, explicitly, that her "magic draws from philosophy, psychology, contemporary art, and historic pieces of magic to give people an experience that is beyond their normal, everyday life," what does *her* everyday life consist of? We, as the observers of these effects, can't help but wonder where and how did she come to weave the tapestry she presents so effortlessly to us?

The answer is simple: there has never been anything else.



Strolling close-up for a gala event at the Hilton in Chicago

At the age of four, long before most kids have any clue there is a future, let alone what they want to do in it besides being superheroes and balleri-

nas, Jeanette Andrews knew she wanted to be a magician. On a magical October evening in 1994, the young Andrews happened to catch Siegfried & Roy on TV, doing what they did best — mastering the impossible. She was hooked. "I was basically trying to, little kid style, create my own magic effects," she says with a smile in her voice. What kind of effects was she doing? "It was the 'here's the cup or whatever. And now Mom and Dad close your eyes. Now it's gone' kind of thing."

With the type of single mindedness only a four-year-old can muster, Jeanette "practiced" these effects for, as she puts it, "a million hours a day." Her parents, not being performers or entertainers themselves, weren't sure how to help their daughter beyond unconditional support and encouragement. Until they found a magic trick set, the kind made precisely for this type of situation. And since it was so close to Christmas, they delivered the best gift they could, wrapped up under the tree, just waiting to spark a lifetime of learning. "For about a month or so afterward," she says, "I learned many of the tricks in the magic set and put together a little show. And that's what I did for my preschool class."

That's right. Little hands that could barely hold a deck of cards were running [redacted] and [redacted] effects through their [redacted]. Whatever that little kit had to offer, Andrews was there for it. At

that point, magic was her primary interest — just the idea of learning how to perform these little miracles. And she was good. Enough so that over the next eighteen months or so, she was even garnering outside attention.

"I started doing the stuff that most kid magicians do: performing at school and performing at block parties and that sort of stuff." Naturally, though, ambition didn't stop there. Why work for free when you can get folks to chip in? That was the point Andrews started performing in the controlled environment of her own backyard. "I charged,

I think it was either a nickel or a dime, for our neighbors."

she says proudly. "I was just really, really adamant to everybody that I was like, 'No, this is what I'm gonna do.' And thankfully my parents believed me."

Those same parents who had gotten the ball rolling with the magic kit when she was four knew they needed to help her with the next step now that she was six. Mom was the first to step up.

Caryn Andrews worked in a suburb of Chicago for the Butterfield Park District and one day, in casual conversation, just happened to let slip that her daughter, then a mere six years old, was really into magic. To which the other person in the conversation responded, "Oh, I wonder if she would like to do a little show for our preschool class?" All of a sudden, Andrews had her first professional booking.

"I genuinely don't know how it came about," Andrews recalls. "So I put on the kind of nicest, most businessy looking outfit I, as a six-year-old, had. I borrowed a briefcase from my mom to put my tricks in and showed this person a trick or my tricks in and showed this person a magic set." Naturally, Andrews got the gig. "They agreed to have me do the show for their preschoolers for \$10. Which of course, to a six-year-old in the mid '90s, was a fortune." And that's how it started.

The thing is, even though your audience might be preschoolers, you can't just do the same tricks you've been doing. By this point, Andrews had exhausted everything in the magic kit that "was of interest to me or that I kind of felt compelling." It was time to move on. This is where Dad, Mike Andrews, comes in.

Jeanette Andrews performing a modern classic at the Museum of Contemporary Art



Andrews' show *Thresholds* opened with classic magic and manipulation, then audiences followed her through a house, experiencing different sensory magic in different rooms.

PHOTO: NIKKI HEDRICK

When magic tricks give way to magic books and trips to the toy store are replaced by trips to the library, that's a sure sign you're starting to take the craft seriously. The next step, naturally, is to go bigger. "By then, my dad and I kind of started to make some of the props from some of the magic books from the library, so I was trying to put together little routines." Andrews was adding effects to her repertoire, but even at that young age, she knew there were things that suited, and things that didn't.

For example, she never found Cups & Balls of any interest. "I don't know why," she says. "It just wasn't. I really did not like any type of rope magic as a kid. That just was not my thing." As she thinks about it, her mind sending her memories back to her six-year-old self, the timbre of her voice changes, becomes more contemplative. It's not hard to understand, then, how she could sit for hours and hours in front of the computer researching an effect. It's all there in how she analyzes her magical interests from a quarter century ago. "Maybe it's just very visually uninteresting to me," she says. "I just wasn't drawn to it. Anything like that, that was sort of like in a lot of those kits, I just really wasn't drawn to it. Same thing with Linking Rings. I just wasn't interested and I don't know why."

Then she delves deeper into the mystery. "I think I was more drawn, categorically, toward transformations. I think they were more interesting to me. I feel like that was more like the type of magic I gravitated toward the most as a kid." Even further in, it feels like she starts to visualize the world through that much younger self in order to answer the question. "I think also, by extension, kind of why some of the other types of magic were uninteresting would be that they were very process heavy; multi-sequence, multi-phase type of things." Coming back to the present, her voice is once again nimble and her ideas bouncing. "I think, as a little kid, it just wasn't as interesting to me. I'm sure I learned [redacted] and, as a five-year-old, was instantly frustrated. I was trying to learn and I was like, *This — I don't get this. Next.*"

She clarifies, again, that this is her "elementary school self" talking. Today, her thoughts, naturally, are different. "But I think those hyper visual things, especially when you're performing for other kids, that's obviously the quickest way to get a reaction." It's fascinating to hear her dip in and out of the past and present, reconciling each with the other to not only explain it, but perhaps to understand it herself. "I feel like when I think back on what I did," she explains, "I, of course, was very, very interested in levitations. Like most kids." Sure, but do most kids start learning [redacted] at six or seven? Will most kids enlist the aid of a friend to

do them do a version of [redacted] Only the most dedicated will look around, at six or seven years old, and realize that they need to get some illusions into the act, whatever it took.

"I did a couple of things, like the [redacted] kind of pamphlet-type of thing. All those illusions that you make out of cardboard. Yeah, that kind of stuff."

There comes a point though, as a parent, especially when your child's interests veer wildly from your own experiences, when you have to acknowledge that you're out of ideas. When your child has exhausted all the books and pamphlets, when they've run through everything both you and they can get your hands on to help teach them. And you can't even turn to the Internet because video sharing platforms like

YouTube are still years in the future. That's when you look for any port in a storm and everything that comes your way you look to see if it can help.

For the Andrews family, that came in the form of an article in one of the newspapers that served their suburban Chicago area. The story was about a semi-local magician named Ralph Beck, who just happened to be Howard Thurston's great nephew. The article may have said he gave lessons or that may have just been something Caryn Andrews guessed could be a possibility, but either way, the family jumped into the car and drove 25 minutes away for a visit. "He was probably about eighty when I was five," Jeannette says. So, one can only imagine the surprise when he opens the door and sees a miniature magi standing before him. "My parents, I think, talked him into teaching me or at least talked him into being open to it."

According to family legend, this first meeting was a bit extraordinary. Jeannette doesn't remember it, and her father shared the details with her only recently, but it sounds perfect. Understandably, Ralph would be a bit hesitant to take on a pupil so young, but he also knew enough that you could never know what was being presented to you.

"Okay, have her show me what she's learned so far and I'll take a look," Beck said.

Jeannette pulled out her magic kit paraphernalia and homemade props and started performing. While she doesn't remember exactly which effect it was, she knows it must have been a basic, beginner effect, maybe something like the Ball & Vase. Ralph watched her with interest and when she was done, took the prop and performed the same effect, but with a slightly different handling, which improved it. Then he handed it back.

Jeannette immediately saw the benefit of Ralph's additions and performed the trick again, but this time added another twist of her own. The two went back and forth, riffing on this simple effect, until Beck knew that here was someone he could work with. Someone he could teach. "Apparently, according to my dad, Ralph was kind of like 'Okay, I'll do this.'"



PHOTO: NIKKI HEDRICK

The transformation of a flower during a 2015 performance of *Thresholds* in Florida.

For the next eight years, from about five until thirteen, Jeannette learned what she could. Not only about the effects themselves, but the magic

community as a whole. "There wasn't an SAM chapter in our area, so we all would go together to lectures and that kind of stuff. He was instrumental in all of that." Their association, which came to be one of close family friendships in addition to the mentorship, only ended when Beck passed away. By the time she reached thirteen, her grounding in magic was thoroughly secure.

Understanding Jeannette Andrews' history with and love of magic is only one part of the story, though. To get a more rounded picture, we have to delve a bit into the science side of things. She explains that she "got very interested in bringing magic into the art world when I was about fifteen. I just had a hobby, really, of studying philosophy and got very interested in learning a lot about aesthetics. Looking at it through a couple of different philosophical lenses of existentialism and a kind of overall epistemology and then later on, and predominantly, phenomenology, and understanding how we perceive what we perceive and how we know what we know and as a result getting really interested in philosophy. Also being very interested in science was a pretty natural next step in terms of related interest in investigating these

types of questions." All of which she sums up in the short sentence: "I just had a passing interest in it."

The "passing interest" turned into more with another random encounter, this time at the joint IBM/SAM convention in Louisville, Kentucky in 2008. Andrews found herself at a dinner, sitting with Simon and Ginny Aronson, who had become close friends and mentors by this point. The other couple at the table, though, she didn't know. After introductions were made, the inevitable question was asked: "What do you do?" to which the gentleman, Luciano Ristori of Fermilab, replied, "Oh, I'm a particle physicist." Andrews' first thought was this

was the coolest person she'd ever met. Then she promptly lost touch with him.

A few years later, they did, in fact, reconnect, and have since become good friends. But the addition of Ristori to her life led her to being considerably more proactive in seeking out conversations about science and doing more research on her own. "Now, I think it's a big part of the narrative of my work to be showing a lot of the lesser-known phenomenon that occur, that have been studied in science, and trying to have more of a public discourse on them because there are so many of these really fantastical things," she says, the excitement evident in her voice. "Everything from how seeds and plants work and just, really, the incredible things that happen around us every day that people kind of take for granted. Trying to show a little bit of the scientific narratives around those and then contextualizing them within magic performances in digestible ways for the public. That's a lot of the kind of shape that my work has taken."

All of which leads to a certain educational component in her work. "I am very passionate about sharing information that I have found from reliable, credible, fact checked sources with the public in ways that are fun and interesting," she says. Then, by way of example, she explains that for an upcoming corporate gig, she'll show a diagram of human eyes and spend a few seconds, a sound bite really, talking about the optic nerve and how the optic nerve works. It's not a lesson,

certainly, since she's not a teacher, and is quick to point that out; it's merely part of her presentation. But if the general public learns a few things in the process, there's nothing wrong with that.

Andrews' most recent work though, one of her most ambitious, is something that takes all of her interests and combines them, putting them on figurative display in an interactive art piece. *Invisible Museums of the Unseen* — which, unfortunately, closed on May 2 — consists of four museums "hidden" in four different Chicago-area parks, each with a different theme — "Each,"

according to the Museum of Contemporary Art's website,



Corporate close-up alternates with art, science, and philosophy.

"dedicated to the mysterious forces that act upon us." There's one dedicated to Sound Waves, one for Air Gravity, and a final one for Reflections.

When discussing the *Museums*, Andrews makes sure to be upfront that this is an audio art piece and not magic. "It's a straight art piece," she says. "But it plays with a lot of the thematic elements that I explore in a lot of my magic as well." She goes on to clarify her definitions: "It's not magic because there's no performative piece to it," she explains. "There is no piece of it that I think most magicians would quantify as actual magic that's happening. It's not doing a manipulation routine; it's not doing a card trick. It doesn't have any of that." But it is magical.

There's a classic quote from Arthur C. Clarke that goes something like "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." When that quote enters our conversation, Andrews' eyes light up and she relates that she had referenced that quote several times when working with the developers of the Gesso App on which the *Museums* operate.

But what are the *Invisible Museums of the Unseen*? Simply put, they are an audio guide for a space that only exists within your head. When you get to a certain point at whichever park you have decided to visit, you hit the start button on your smartphone and the audio guide takes you around the physical space. Gesso uses geolocations to know where you are, so as you wander, your physical location will trigger an audio

description of what you're "seeing," including impossible objects which just happen to be there for your enjoyment.

The entire concept, with the exception of the actual app development, is all Andrews, and ironically, it was born from the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the lockdown occurred, like most of us, the recurring thought of, *What am I going to do now?* was running through her head. A proposal request had come in right about then for an international exhibition that was supposed to happen in February of 2021, but Andrews was pretty certain things weren't going to clear up by then. "I had to figure out something to pitch these people," she remembers. "If I can't travel out of the country and if people can't gather, but something that's still kind of magical — like, what in the world would that even be? I had no clue and I was on a deadline." That was the point she remembered Gesso.

She had met the developers several months earlier and loved their product, not realizing it would be the one technical spark she needed to bring her creation to life. "I live in a 350-square-foot studio apartment that now is also my studio. I spent weeks with big sheets of paper spread out all over my floor, brainstorming, and came up with this idea, which came about a little bit because I had just done this magic by telephone piece. This was also something that had been swirling around in my brain for a little bit, and then when the pandemic hit, I was like, 'Now is the time to do this.' Given that I had just done an audio-based project and really enjoyed it, I was like, *Alright, well, I've done this reporting. I've done this slightly more narrative audio and it was fun. This is a direction I feel like I could continue to work in.*"

And she did. The *Invisible Museums of the Unseen* were a success and Andrews knows she could adapt it for other venues in other cities, so the possibilities of revisiting it are certainly there.

For now, though, Jeanette Andrews is pondering what her post-pandemic world will look like. Before it hit, she was bouncing back and forth between Chicago and New York, performing in *Speakeasy Magick* hosted by Todd Robbins. At the time, she had been excited to be getting back into close-up magic. "Not that I was ever out of it," she explains. "Half of what I did was strolling magic, corporate

events, and stuff like that, but it was just this big kick to just really, really fall in love with card magic again."

She's also spending this time "exploring other forms that magic can take and what that might look like for me. I'm really kind of at square one of my thinking on a lot of this." While she may not have a lot to report publicly, you can tell the wheels are turning.

Jeanette Andrews may just be trying to figure out what the future will hold for her, but whatever it is, you can bet it's going to take more than seeing to believe it. ♣



Jeanette Andrews delivering a presentation at the Birmingham Museum of Art