

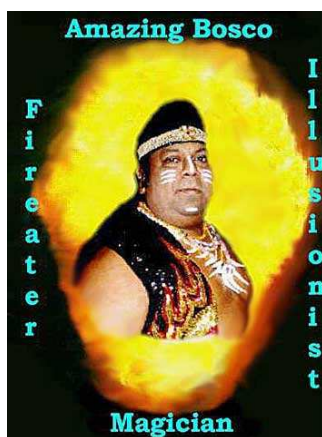
A FIERY PERFORMANCE

TQR INTERVIEWS CANNES FILM FESTIVAL RED-CARPET ACTOR-MAGICIAN

BY ENRICO VARELLA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY A B FRANCIS

He is opinionated. He is unique. He puts on a fiery performance. He is a fire-eater and illusionist. Now, he is an actor who was nominated for a Best Actor award at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. He has walked the red carpet, and breathed the rarified air of stardom.



Meet Singapore's renowned magician, who has mystified and, occasionally, terrified his audiences. He is A B Francis, also known as Bosco. Bosco has eaten light-bulbs, walked on broken glass, and skewered his tongue, eaten fire, and other heart-stopping stunts and illusions.

When I approached A B about doing an interview, he was more than happy to do so. And happy he was, as this interview took place days before he was due to fly off to Cannes for the red-carpet event with director, Eric Khoo and his onscreen-son, Jathishweran. This interview, like Bosco's performance, is no-holds-barred. There is a strong sense of honesty and truthfulness in his answers, trademarks of artists who have paid the price in myriad sacrifices for their art.

Due to the comprehensive nature of A B's responses, this interview comes in two parts. We will continue with Part 2 in the next issue. Enjoy the interview.

Name: Bosco Francis

Performing Name: *Amazing Bosco*

Name of Children and Age: Shawn (son), Aundrey (son) and Victoria (daughter).

Specialty of Magic: Parlor magic, Stage Magic, Illusions, Bizarre Magic, some close-up magic, and Fire Magic.

Number of years as Professional Performer: More than 15 years.



No. Bosco is not fretting over the interview questions. This is a scene from his Cannes-nominated film.

Enrico Varella: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed, AB. You must have done dozens of interviews before I came knocking. Before we begin, how do you prefer to be addressed? IBM members call you *Bosco*, *AB*, and *Francis*.

Bosco: Whatever they have been calling me, still gets a response from me because they are still my names. However, if my children are around then there will be confusion if you call me *Francis*. Francis is my surname and all my sons have the name Francis. Some of their friends call them Francis, too. So you can continue to call me the way you would.

EV: I will. Thanks. Well, AB, how did you begin in magic? At which age? Who influenced you?

B: No one influenced me into magic. Many years ago, I came back from Indonesia where I was on an assignment as a senior electrical technician, installing power lines for an oil company in Medan, Indonesia. I was looking for a job, when I saw a vacancy for assistants to work for a drama assignment. There were 300 applicants, and only 20 were selected for the job. It turned out to be working as an assistant to **Mr. John Calvert**. He is a renowned magician from the USA who was about to present his show at the then-National Theatre at River Valley Road. While I was working as an assistant, I got to know all his illusions and his magic. I performed my first show in 1972 for the annual staff party of a leading hotel on Scotts Road, while I was working there. I then joined IBM Ring 115 during the late 1970's after some persuasion from Mr. John Teo.

EV: What was your favorite branch of magic?

B: I started off doing Children's' magic and then, Clown Magic. Now my favorite branch of magic is Parlor and Stage. However, I like to invent my own magic but have lots of problem in getting the props done. I have the ideas and how the props could be made, but could not gather the various people to get it done. I always believe whatever magic I perform it has to entertain the people that are watching it.

EV: What is your current preference for magic type?

B: My preference is to do magic that has not been performed or seen by most magicians and/or the public at large. Any form of magic that could intrigue the minds of my audience.

EV: In our club performances, you mention bizarre magic a lot. How does that compare to fire-eating?

B: Fire eating is part of bizarre magic where there is the element of impossibility, danger and wonderment. Every human being is engulfed with fear in their daily routines. The higher the percentage of fear in them, the lower their achievements will be. A simple routine like going to work may not bring any fear to you in Singapore. If you are in the Middle East, the fear of going to work is extremely high. So you have to reduce the fear in you and at the same time not to endanger, or place yourself at risk. You walk that fine line between life and death which is a calculated risk. It is in this thrill that people appreciate and watch in excitement. You have to eradicate that fear in you to be able to do bizarre magic.

EV: Interesting. What you have said sounds like the premise for television magicians, Blaine and Angel. You seem to be regarded and accepted as the leading fire-eater in Singapore. Why the fascination with fire?

B: Your question has an element of ambiguity as you say 'it seems only.' I am not sure myself if I am regarded and accepted as the leading fire-eater in Singapore. This judgment has to come from prominent magicians like yourself. In any case, it does not matter to me because I still get my shows and still remain competitive in the entertainment market. Anyway I like to thank you for your compliments if that is what you meant.

EV: It is a compliment and observation, I assure you.

AB: I was watching our late-Great Wong performing fire-twirling at the hotel where I was working in the mid 70's. It amused me at that time, but nothing really conceptualized. During that time I was working as an Assistant Engineer in the hotel. I was to take charge of a fire fighting team within the premises apart from my other duties. Subsequently, I started to train all the staff of the hotel from the Resident Manager downwards on fire training and evacuation. It was then that I read some literature on fire-eating. So, one day I took part in a fancy dress contest during the annual staff party. It received such an overwhelming response that I decided to put together a commercial fire act.

I am the first to do Fire magic in Singapore in the mid 1970's because I have not seen anyone else performing fire at that time. It is not easy to climb up the entertainment ladder or to be the best performer in your own rights, to command the market for yourself. However it is even more difficult to remain on the top of your competitors for all this while. Any competition is healthy. I know my competitors and I exploit their weaknesses to be able to remain there on the top of them.

Fire has always intrigued mankind since the beginning of time. It has many uses in our daily life and also possesses the destructive powers. It is in these destructive powers that you put the human element into it that baffles the audience.

EV: Weren't you warned by your parents never to play with fire?

B: This fear did not arise because, by then, I was a professionally-trained fire-fighter who has undergone fire training and smoke house rescue training.

EV: I am sure you have been burnt; it is almost a cliché in fire-eating. Which was your most dangerous performance?

B: Every performance possesses a danger, and that threat cannot be eradicated. Despite all the precautions taken, there is bound to have mishaps. I was performing at River Valley Road for a Residence Committee function, when I went out of the tentage area, for safety reasons, to blow fire. It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon, with a clear blue sky and a blazing mid noon sun shining down from the skies above. I blew the fire and suddenly, the back-draft of the fire engulfed my face. I could not see the flames as it was in the hot sun. I felt the biting of the skin on my face when I realized that my face was on fire. My daughter, coincidentally, forgot to carry a wet towel on that fateful day. So I was left with no choice but to put out the fire with my bare hands. However, by then, the damage was done. My whole face was burned. I did not consult the



doctor nor did I apply any medication. The following Saturday I was back performing my show again.

EV: Ouch. I can't imagine the pain you had to go through. Misdirecting you: which was your most memorable performance?

B: I was performing for the old folk's home in Bedok. I have to speak in all the languages, namely, Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay and broken-English. All the attendees were above 60 years old. They were all very happy during the show and I could see the joy in their faces. After my show, I was at the back changing to go back home. I saw this old man who could hardly walk, taking very small steps and with his right hand arm stretched out perpendicular to his body, walking towards me. I looked up and went towards him. He uttered very softly in English and said, "Thank you very much. We all enjoyed your show. Thank you, Thank you." My emotions started to take a grip on me. I told him it was okay. 'I am so happy that you all enjoyed my show.'

"The children of today, very conveniently, put them into these places where they subsequently deteriorate and meet their ultimate destination. Is this what they get in return? Some of the children do not even come and visit them at all." – A B FRANCIS

When he left, I asked myself one question. Most of them come from a reasonably good family. Their children have money to put their parents in an old folks' home but where is the LOVE?? These people need love. They still can appreciate it by taking the trouble to come and say 'thank you'. Tomorrow, they may be gone and I am sure that he is gone by now. They give their life to bring their children up but what are the children doing to them in the name of 'having no time' to attend to them?! The children of today, very conveniently, put them into these places where they

subsequently deteriorate and meet their ultimate destination. Is this what they get in return? Some of the children do not even come and visit them at all.

EV: I know that your son eats fire. How did he start performing?

B: By the way, he eats rice too.

EV: Ha-ha! I'm very sure about that, A B.

B: My first son, Shawn assisted me when he was 10 years old. When he was about to do national service, my second son, Aundrey started assisting me in my performance. So when Shawn went into national service, Aundrey took over. When Aundrey went into national service, my daughter, Victoria took over. I do not force or influence any of them to do like their father. It was based on their own volition. Shawn is never interested to perform commercially even though he could and has performed all the acts. Aundrey likes performing for the sake of money. I could see that he does not have a passion for performing.

EV: Any pressure for him to acquire the art? Like father, like son?

B: They acquired the art while they were assisting me. It is their choice.

EV: Does your family worry about you at each fiery performance?

B: My wife always worries about me and she very seldom wants to watch my show.

EV: What are your children most concerned about you these days?

B: Nowadays, children do not bother so much about their parents. They get married and they begin to live their own lives.

“I do not force or influence any of them to do like their father. It was based on their own volition.” – A B FRANCIS

EV: You have held leadership positions in IBM and SAM. Which were these?

B: Well I cannot recall them all. I believe I was in the management committee and the Assistant-Secretary in IBM at one time. I was in the management committee and Vice-President, who salvaged the SAM organization when the whole committee resigned en bloc and that was the time I persuaded Mr. **Charles Choo** to take over as President.

EV: Who in, IBM or SAM, was most influential on you? How did he/she/they do so?

B: Mr. **John Teo** was the first to influence me to join the magic organization and many, many years later Mr. **Gordon Koh**, after much persuasion made me to join SAM.

EV: Who do you regard as the most influential magicians in Singapore from then to now? Why?

B: Apart from Mr. John Teo, who makes every effort to perform and sometimes explain the magic he does at every meeting, I find Mr. **Gician Tan** making every effort to encourage young and budding magicians to come up to perform. His close encounters and guidance to the local magicians is to be discovered and exemplified by others.

EV: Moving on to exciting matters. You add to your resume 'actor'. What was it like being the first magician in Singapore to land a leading part in a story about magic and relationships?



B: Many years ago I was thinking of making a movie. At that time my thoughts was about making a movie in India. India has one of the biggest film industries in the world. This idea came about when I met some of the actors and actress over there. When I met Mr. **Eric Khoo** some years back at a drinking session, I did not have any clue that I was going to make a movie with him. Mr. Eric Khoo, subsequently, knew the things that I could perform where I always emphasized to him about mind over matter. He

later got to know about the strained relationship between my son and me. Two years ago, we tossed about the idea of doing a movie about an estranged, alcoholic father and his son. Mr. Eric's associates felt that this movie - originally called *You and Me* - with the magic involvement, will not go anywhere. However, Mr. Eric always says that he sees something in my eyes. So, one day in October 2007, he read a book titled *The Road*, about a father and a son during the wee hours of the morning. Immediately he decided then, to go for it and make the movie. Well, many of the things were done at the last minute and, in some cases, the script was even incomplete.

We still went ahead to shoot the movie. It was only after shooting the movie for the first three days that we found the direction, and it just flowed like a river down the mountain. The title was then changed to MY MAGIC because of the *bizarre magic* that eventually moved the whole production crew.

EV: Describe each person's involvement in this film: Eric, Kim Ho, yourself and your Director of Photography. How was the story born?



B: Well Mr. Eric Khoo was the film director. Mr. Wong Kim Ho was the Script Writer and Mr. Adrian Tan was the director of cinematography who disliked the father (I play) in the same manner as I am in the situation. I was the actor where Mr. Eric said that we didn't need a stuntman and we didn't need special effects

because they had me. It was really a satisfying moment for me.

EV: In a nutshell, how would you describe the story? Here is your chance to plug the film. When is it expected to be released?

B: There are 3 parts to this movie... **(To be continued in the next issue)**

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