



Photo provided

Illusionist and magician Jay Owenhouse will perform his version of Harry Houdini's straitjacket escape, the jaws of death, during his tour stop Saturday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Mainstage Theatre.

Jay Owenhouse

Family, tigers all part of the act for 'The Authentic Illusionist'

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — Jay Owenhouse spent much of 2008 in a state of bliss.

Alongside Susan, his wife of 21 years, and their four children — John, Peter, Juliana and Christina — Owenhouse became an international hit, touring his successful magic show throughout China and Japan, even receiving the award for “Best Touring Family Show in Asia.”

Shortly after returning to the U.S., everything changed. Susan became ill. She developed a rare liver infection and urgently needed a transplant.

“She was in Seattle awaiting a liver and one didn’t come soon enough,” Owenhouse says by phone from his home in Bozeman, Montana. “She passed away in 2009. It was just a shock. It was devastating to our family. At the time, our youngest was 5 years old and I just felt like I couldn’t go on.”

So, Owenhouse stopped. No more tours. No more magic.

“Then my kids came to me,” he says. “They said, ‘Look, let’s put this back together and do it as a family.’ And that’s what we did.”

On Saturday, Owenhouse, his children, who now range in age from 13-27, and their two Bengal tigers, Shekinah and Sheena, bring their current tour, “Dare to Believe,” to the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

“The show is really a collection of a lot of my favorite things I’ve done in magic in the past 20-plus years,” Owenhouse says. “It’s some of the grandest illusions in the world and an intimate encounter with my tigers. We do some impromptu magic in the audience, and I recreate one of Houdini’s great escapes in every show.”

On Saturday, Owenhouse performs Houdini’s iconic upside-down straitjacket escape — with a twist.

“It’s probably the first real big escape that got him a lot of attention,” Owenhouse says. “Of course, we’ve added a certain element of danger to it to make it

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Owenhouse dares audience to *believe*

penseful. We call it the jaws of n put in a regulation straitjacket upside down 15 feet above the ere are two steel jaws, each weigh-ounds, and they are held open by is lit on fire so I have about two o make my escape from the strait- l release my feet and jump 15 feet ge before these jaws come crash- l.”

Harry Houdini was given moni- as The Great Houdini, King of l Master of Magic, Owenhouse ted a nickname oft repeated in r articles – The Authentic Illu-

ally got that tag- a newspaper years ago and at- ally didn't like it I didn't under- nd then I started ce it because the lly is an authen- rience of the at I love,” he 's about three his life-long love had for animals, at I have for my id my love for 'illusions.”

and raised in California, use first saw a magician at his sis- iday party when he was 4 years

urse we didn't have the Internet talked my mom into taking me to y so I could get some books on Owenhouse says. “She even had to t to me because I couldn't read yet ; how I started to learn some card en as I got into fifth and sixth t some tricks at a magic shop.” al turning point, however, came aw illusionist Doug Henning per- “World of Magic” show at the cisco Opera House.

a freshman in high school and ed performing at birthday parties jets,” Owenhouse says. “Seeing nning was life-changing for me ever imagined how amazing it to experience a show like that. He lusions that were incredible and I

loved it. I knew that's what I wanted to do with my life.”

Owenhouse continued performing mag- ic through high school and then was re- cruited for a show at the Las Vegas Hilton. He spent a year in rehearsals and right be- fore the show was to open, it was suddenly canceled.

“I was kind of disillusioned after that so I moved to Montana and got my under- graduate degree in psychology at Montana State University,” Owenhouse says. “I was on my way to go to graduate school and I had an epiphany that if I was going to spend the rest of my life doing something I

should at least do what I love. And the things that I loved was working with animals and magic. So I decided to go into magic full time in 1990.”

At first, his magic career started off small. Owen- house performed in shop- ping malls and worked his way up to a big illusion show. It was when he started that show in the early 1990s that Owenhouse reached out to tiger trainer Rick Glassey, known for his work on films such as “Doctor Dolittle” (1998), “Second- hand Lions” (2003) and

“Evan Almighty” (2007), among others, to learn his craft.

“He was the tiger trainer for an animal theme park called Africa USA when I was in high school,” Owenhouse says. “I would go see him and spend time with him and the tigers. That's how it really all started.”

After working with Glassey for more than a year, Owenhouse purchased his first tiger, Sherekhan, as a cub, and decided to start a tiger sanctuary near his home in 1996, eventually incorporating the 600-pound male Bengal tiger into his show. He had Sherekhan for 18 years.

The two tigers now featured in Owen- house's act are twin sisters, Shekinah, a white Bengal tiger, and Sheena, an orange Bengal.

“They lived in our house with us for the first six months, and once they got to be 100 pounds we moved them out to our sanctuary,” Owenhouse says. “It's incredi-

ble habitat that is better than any zoo I've seen personally. It's got an in-ground pool that is heated in the winter because tigers love to swim. It has a cave that they can sleep in at night and a big area where they can run and play.”

While Owenhouse says no one who has seen the show has ever criticized his use of the animals, he says he does get the occa- sional Facebook comment about having the big cats as part of his act.

“I do once in awhile get a post on Face- book where someone will say, ‘You shouldn't be traveling with tigers. They should be in a sanctuary,’” Owenhouse says. “What those people don't understand is that I only take them out on the road about 10-12 days a month to make sure they get 18-20 days a month in their sanctuary. In doing that they live a very balanced life. We have a climate-controlled trailer and I open up the door and they are always excited to go, just like a dog is excited to go in the car, because we make it fun. People who come to the show quickly see that they are not props, they are part of our family.”

And family is what this show is all about. All four of his children still participate in the act, although Juliana, 22, who is his on- stage assistant, is the only one that works for Owenhouse full time. John, 27, who graduated with a degree in financial en- gineering from Montana State University, works with the university on a research project during the week. Peter, 25, is a flight instructor, and Christina, 13, goes to pub- lic school. Still, all four siblings join their father on the road during the weekends.

“It works out great because we are able to be together as a family on the weekends, and I think it's inspiring for people to see a show where a family is working together,” Owenhouse says. “The show is about be- lieving in the impossible and we use the il- lusions almost as a metaphor to give peo- ple that sense of wonder again. We try to use it as an opportunity for hope for people who are maybe going through something difficult, and the tigers are part of that as well. ... I really believe that our lives are better when we interact with animals in a respectful and dignified way. It's certainly enriched our lives and I think it has en- riched a lot of other people's lives as well.”

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Photo provided

Illusionist and magician Jay Owenhouse and his orange Bengal tiger, Sheena, will perform during his tour stop Saturday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Mainstage Theatre.

IF YOU GO

Who: Jay Owenhouse, The Authentic Illusionist in “Dare to Believe”

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$29.50-\$69.50

Contact: 927-8700 or themendelcenter.com

Artist info: www.jayowenhouse.com