



PHOTOS: KIRK TUCK / ESTHER'S FOLLIES



# What's a Nice, Talented Guy Like **RAY ANDERSON** Still Doing in Austin After 30 Years?

BY MARK HOLSTEIN

At the corner of Sixth Street and Red River in Austin, Texas, sits a garishly decorated building, with a mermaid-like sculpture hovering over the street like the carved bow of a hallucinogenic ship. Sixth Street is ground zero for college bars, touristy music joints, T-shirt shops, day-old pizza slice vendors, and throngs of tourists, college kids, and other characters of the night, looking for their preferred entertainment. But this building is different — this is *Esther's Follies*, home to Austin's long-running singing, dancing, satirical comedy variety show.

Inside, the wild and colorful decor continues. Fish swim in vintage modified television sets. Oversized, nightmare-inducing mannequins evoke characters from some other world. This place *is* another world. Inside the 280-seat theater, the crazy wonderful decor continues. The small stage at the far end is unique — it is backed by windows. Sixth Street and the craziness of a weekend night on the main drag of this city are the backdrop for the show. An eight-sheet George poster hangs high above the lobby floor, the only suggestion that magic might be a part of the experience.

This is the story of the *Esther's Follies* magician, Ray Anderson. He has been described by some knowledgeable pros as the best comedy illusionist working in the US, and unless you've been to Austin, you've probably never heard of him. That anonymity suits Ray just fine and, in part, may explain his success. Like some of the really great talent in our industry, Ray is invisible to our convention-going, magazine-reading, YouTube-watching peers. Instead, he focuses on this thing called *Esther's Follies*. He is consistently challenging the current paradigms of success in magic.

*Esther's Follies* is primarily a political sketch comedy show. The skits are musical parodies of current events. The talented cast romps through the news in a brilliant set of skits that leave nothing out of their sights. On their own, the *Esther's* cast would deliver a terrific, extremely fast-paced,

and completely entertaining show of music, comedy, and wit. But then there is Ray. A quick check of social media sites like Yelp or Trip Advisor reveals that the true star of this show, in the minds of the paying public, is Ray.

Ray has been here for well over thirty years. He started in his college years, doing the stuff every other magician did. It took him a while to figure out the format and the audiences for this unusual venue. In the early years, at the first of four *Esther's* locations, it was small magic — sponge balls, Linking Rings. For a brief time, *Esther's* moved to a legitimate theater, but without the windows behind the stage. While the venue was not ideal for the *Esther's* show, it did provide Ray with an opportunity to start incorporating full-scale stage illusions, starting out by building many himself. Over the years, Ray has presented the entire catalog of large-scale illusions.

While most magicians would have been frustrated by the huge windows behind the stage, Ray recognized the strong potential. If the illusion can be done surrounded, then the audience in the theater enjoys the illusion with the added attraction of the reaction of passing pedestrians who have stumbled onto the strange scene. If a secret needs to be protected, an appropriate backdrop slides into place, blocking the street view temporarily. Either way, Ray reacts to and comments on the passing tourists. The result is completely original and very entertaining.

The scale of some of Ray's illusions is surprising, given the small stage and tiny backstage area. A recent addition is a version of Mark Kalin's Eclipse, a massive prop that is permanently stored in the fly loft above the stage, hanging from chains, and flies in from above for the performance. The illusion literally fills the stage. Seen that close, the large illusions have a very strong impact. This is why Ray makes the extra effort. "I've never followed the latest trends in magic," he says. "I could get away with doing much smaller magic. But our audiences love seeing these



spectacular illusions right under their noses.” The closest seats are just inches from the stage. Those in the front row could easily touch the performers.

The illusions showcase Ray’s talents. They are impeccably performed with original presentations, dramatic lighting, and perfectly suited music. In fact, the music often comes first for Ray. With his formal dance education (just a few blocks away at the University of Texas), he is able to design and choreograph an illusion presentation before he orders the prop. Comedy usually plays some role, even in the most serious presentations.

In the beginning, with a few years at *Esther’s* under his belt, Ray toured the country while doing comedy magic in comedy clubs. He tired of traveling alone and being relegated to the middle act spot as a prop/variety act. But working with talented comedians taught him a great deal about writing and presenting comedy. He returned to Austin a seasoned comedic performer.

This is most evident in his opening, a routine without any magic, which he calls “Robot.” He immediately breaks the fourth wall as a lascivious mechanical man who interacts with male and female audience members in a very R-rated way. The audience loves it. As Ray abruptly breaks the character and bounds onto the stage for his first illusion, he has established himself as very funny, edgy, and extremely likeable. As he begins the illusion, currently Jim Steinmeyer’s Pole Levitation, the entire audience, as one, realizes they’ve been had. Ray has established himself. It’s a brilliant foundation for all that follows.

Ray’s feature turn comes shortly before the intermission. For years, the routine was built around the Jumbo Sidekick illusion. Currently, Ray fires his dog Leroy from a small cannon, through the window, and into an empty box held by an audience member on the street. The magic is very strong. But it is nearly beside the point. This segment is a comedic tour de force. For five minutes, Ray commands the stage and the audience with a barrage of one-liners, sight gags, and audience participation. It is impossible to convey the pace and timing in print. There is not a second of this segment that is out of place. After thirty-plus years, it is enviably perfect.

Most performers would be more than satisfied with the quality of performance and audience reaction achieved nightly. But not Ray. While he focused on the magic segments, he shadowed the rest of the show. He would sit in the darkened house and watch the rehearsals. He would stand in the wings, watching his fellow cast mates and learning from their experience. During this time, he particularly looked up to Margaret Wiley, most famous for her character Chi Chi LaBamba. Everyone in the *Esther’s* cast credits Margaret with contributing to the creative look, feel, and pace of the *Esther’s Follies* show, from dreaming up wild props and costumes to writing

*The audiences at Esther’s Follies are practically onstage themselves. The Eclipse illusion drops down to fill the stage. Margaret Wiley puts Ray through the Wringer.*

scripts, both intimidating and inspiring the younger cast members, and performing outlandishly hilarious characters and premises. She also influenced Ray's approach to his *Esther's* routines. She even participated in some of Ray's illusions. Because she was a relatively large woman, Ray never considered her an illusion candidate. He'd underestimated her commitment to the show, and she amazed everyone by squeezing into places designed for more traditional assistants.

Tragically, Margaret died about fifteen years ago. Ray was ready to step in and take a much bigger role in the rest of the show. He stepped out of the shadows in the back of the house and became a major contributor to the entire production. Today, he spends much more time on directing and choreographing the rest of the show than he does on his own magic, which does not change as often as the news-driven skits. Ray sees the magic as the spine of the show. The remaining show time is split between audience favorites and current event-focused material.

Spending time with Ray, it's challenging to tease out his philosophy for success in show business. He is humble and self-effacing. He acknowledges that he has worked hard, puts an original stamp on his work, and he has lots of what Penn Jillette has called "flight time." He does not measure success by fame. Ray loves Austin and feels artistically challenged there. But to really understand what makes Ray successful, one must listen to the people around him. Then it all becomes very clear.

Shannon Sedwick has owned *Esther's Follies* since 1977, with her husband Michael Shannon. They are typical small business owners. They work ridiculously hard and they do everything from promotional appearances to plumbing repairs. Shannon is also a major performer in *Esther's*. She sings, dances, and does comedy, all with precision and grace. Her interpretation of an old vaudeville bit in which she removes a huge quantity of hardware from her dress, while portraying Patsy Cline singing "I've Got Your Picture," is a master class in comedy and timing. It stops the show every night.

Shannon considers Ray the best magician she has ever seen. She makes it a point to make the rounds in Vegas and figure out what the others are doing. She describes Ray as sexy, cute, and very funny. He's excellent at making his magic fresh and fun after thousands of performances. She says that the feedback they get on Ray is fantastic. But, most important to Shannon, there is no ego or arrogance at all. He's a normal guy whom everyone loves to be around.

Shannon believes that Ray's perspective as a magician brings an element of theatricality and surprise to the show. When Margaret Wiley died, it was a big personal loss to Shannon but also a huge loss for the show. When Ray stepped in to assume her role, he did so "seamlessly." Shannon credits Ray for bringing audience participation



*The George poster backdrop is the only clue that the show might contain magic. Ray sends a volunteer outside with a box while another shoots a dog from the cannon through the glass pane.*



into the show and he innovated the use of the windows as a significant part of his presentations.

While Shannon and her husband run the place, she describes the creative process as democratic. The cast and writers are all allowed input to the show. But clearly, Shannon weighs Ray's views as more equal. "I trust him completely. He has a feel for what the everyman will like." She also values his relationship with the cast. In challenging rehearsals, he's a "balm on the water." Shannon says that Ray is a workaholic; he does his homework and thinks through everything. "He's a Capricorn kind of guy."

Ellana Kelter has been Ray's chief magic assistant for eight years. She plays a large role in the show, outside the magic, singing and dancing her way through multiple comedic characters. She is terrific in all of her roles, but when it comes time to be the "box jumper" — a term Ellana had only heard recently — she really shines. Ray offers one explanation, "Magicians make a mistake in seeking dancers as assistants. Talented actresses offer so much more as partners in the illusions."

Working with Ray was Ellana's first exposure to magic and she has fallen head over heels in love with her role and the art. She has not seen other magicians, but she loves being able to amaze the *Esther's* audiences and does not mind at all the physical challenges of jumping in and out of the illusions.

The connection between Ray and Ellana is focused, palpable, and electric. Ellana never speaks during the magic, but communicates powerfully through her expressions and physicality. While they are not a couple, their onstage chemistry is romantic. Every night, someone will ask how long they've been married. Both view this as a tremendous compliment. Ellana can hardly imagine working with anyone else. "Ray is my mentor, my cheerleader, and my muse." It comes together in "Wet," Ray and Ellana's stunning rendition of the Water Fountain Levitation. Ray has dispensed with the usual large platform. The illusion is done in a children's wading pool. It is playful, sexy, and a little naughty. It is done inches from the front row and the result is beautiful.

Ray saves one of his characters, The Amazing Frank, for his final spot in the show, just preceding the full cast finale. Frank is a very flamboyant, gum-chewing character with tight pants, a spangled shirt, and a very large codpiece. He is introduced by a voiceover as a lounge performer in a third-class hotel in Guadalajara, Mexico. His assistant, played by several cast members over the years, is extremely agile but not particularly graceful — a kind of gymnastic Pam Thompson. The result is both ridiculous and



*Ray Anderson's Stretcher is presented as a carnival strength tester. The Water Levitation is done in a wading pool within a few feet of the audience. [Facing page] Ellana Kelter shackles Ray into a deadly illusion, and the audience sees some of his struggle to escape. The intimate stage gives the Pole Levitation even more impact.*

hilarious. Several illusions have rotated through T.A. Frank's repertoire, with a Stretcher illusion currently in the spot. For years, "Frank" did the Thin Model Sawing with some extremely challenging acrobatics by the assistant. Importantly, Ray never sacrificed strong magic for a laugh.

After the spirited finale and inevitable standing ovation, the audience exits past the stage. Many stop to talk to Ray. They feel confident that he will be warm and approachable, and he does not disappoint. He is smiling broadly, soft-spoken, and extremely friendly — the opposite of the flamboyant Frank they've just seen. Even though the second show begins in just thirty minutes, and preparation duties call, he spends time for handshakes and hugs and lots of selfies before dashing backstage for the second show.

At the end of the night, a tired but satisfied Ray crosses the street with his canine cannonball Leroy. The luxury condominium he shares with his husband, Steven, literally looks down on the back wall of *Esther's*. From his living room, he can see two of the four locations *Esther's* has had over the years, and the other two are a very short walk away. He met Steven in this neighborhood 22 years ago. His college is just a mile north.

Many wonder why such a nice and extremely talented guy remains in Austin, Texas. Why not establish a show in Las Vegas or take a show on the road? Why not do a television special or pursue lucrative corporate gigs? Why not appear at magic conventions? Ray seems to eschew all of the traditional indicia of success in magic. His life has centered on this Austin neighborhood. As he explains this, he smiles: "Why would I leave? Everything I need is right here."

Both Shannon and Ellana commented that Ray is happy all of the time. He comes to work singing and is never in a bad mood. Ray agrees that he's happy. "I've accomplished everything I've set out to accomplish. I wanted to do magic for a living. There was no plan B." He has done magic his own original way and achieved artistic excellence. He has a creative outlet for his formidable talent and it is evident throughout the *Esther's Follies* show. He is not interested in fame. He is beloved by his cast. He has made a comfortable living. He can't imagine living anywhere other than Austin. He has a great marriage and loves his life.

Ray Anderson may be the most successful magician in our midst. **M**

*The 90-minute Esther's Follies show plays in Austin, Texas every Thursday at 8 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays at 8 and 10 p.m. See EsthersFollies.com for more information.*

*Illusionist Mark Holstein and his wife, Sue — known professionally as The Holsteins — have toured their show across the US. They have been frequent performers at Abbott's Get Togethers, where Mark has served many years as the stage manager. He has written several previous features for MAGIC Magazine over the years. Outside of magic, Mark is a successful attorney for several high-profile corporations.*

