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*Autumn
Morning
Star*

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Autumn Morning Star: Native American Artistry

By Lindsay Smith

Her name is Autumn Morning Star.

As Autumn's beautiful name eloquently expresses, she is a Native American Indian. She is also an accomplished professional magician, award-winning illusionist, and cultural storyteller. There's more. Much more. She is a native flautist, a traditional buckskin dancer, an award-winning stone sculptor, a regalia and beadwork designer, a published poet and short story writer, and an herbalist. And she can perform her show in any of five languages.

Her many interests and talents played an important role in her early development, and many continue to play an important role in her performances today. She embraces her heritage, respects her country, and loves her magic.

Fortunately, her talents and contributions did not go unnoticed. Autumn is one of only fifty outstanding Native American Indians honored by the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of the American Indian for her outstanding cultural illusion show.

"The four things that I dearly love are my magic, my sculpture, my writing, and my music. I have tons of other interests besides those, but the best camera in the world won't be able to take a good picture unless there's focus. So I narrow my focus to these four fields."

The quiet community of Erie, Colorado (population: 18,505, minus two when Autumn and her husband are on the road performing), is situated just minutes north of

Denver. As you exit I-25 to the west toward Erie you'll see an inspiring view of the Front Range and the awesome and often snow-capped Rocky Mountains. It is here you'll find Morning Star Studios, a well-used rehearsal space she calls her "cherished secret jewel."

This is where Autumn brings her magic to life.

Entertaining the Lambs

Autumn was born in Shreveport and lived there for five years; her family then moved to a farm in the deep woods of Louisiana. "We had acres and acres of woods to run and play in and we had every kind of animal you could imagine. I raised baby lambs and I used to perform for them." She adds, "I was usually late for school every day because in the morning I'd feed my lambs, then sing and dance and put on a little show for them on a stage made of hay."

"Basically, my mom took care of us. She was a Depression child and had it pretty hard growing up. She nearly starved to death, so she always made sure we had enough to eat. She's not even five feet tall but she's tough. Very tough. She pushed me hard in school, and made me learn to sew. I am grateful, for I sew all my own regalia, costuming, and black art for the show."

"My dad started off as a police officer. He was 'Officer Safety' on TV. I was very precocious and would sing, dance,

and perform on his show. Dad was my biggest magic supporter. He was always so proud."

Autumn's heritage is primarily a mix of Choctaw and Blackfeet, with some Cajun French in her background. "I finally got onto Ancestry.com and looked up the rest of my lineage. It turns out that, in addition to Blackfeet and Choctaw, I am a Louisiana Creole mix of Cajun French, plus German, Scottish, African, Asian, and more. I'm kind of like the 'It's a Small World' ride at Disneyland."

"If someone asks what I am, I say I'm Blackfeet and Choctaw. I could also use the word 'Indian,' but Indian is really generic and we're all so diverse. Each of our tribal nations is completely different with our belief systems, our tribal dress, and our language. Indian is not an offensive word. We're a people. We're native. We're indigenous to this land. We fight for this land. We serve this country in numbers far greater than the norm in terms of ratio."

The Great Arturo

Magic came into her life early. When Autumn was four or five, there was a vaudeville magician who lived down the street from her family in Shreveport. His name was The Great Arturo. Years later, Autumn would learn his real name.

"I had seen Mark Wilson on TV, and Willard the Wizard at the fair, but The Great Arturo did magic right before my eyes! He vanished a quarter, then pulled the coin out of my little brother's ear. This was amazing! I looked at my brother and thought, 'He has some value now.' So I kidnapped him and took him over to the side of the house, put my hand over his mouth and started digging in his ear. He was screaming and my mom got upset."

"She said, 'Don't put your finger in your brother's ear. If you really want to know how that's done, go ask the magician.' So I tugged on his pant leg and pestered him until finally he showed me. He taught me a basic French Drop and a Classic Palm, which I didn't truly master for years."

Top of Her Class

Academically, Autumn graduated at the top of her class in college. After a mediocre academic showing in high school, it was years before she attempted college. In 1997, she was accepted at the University of Memphis, graduating summa cum laude, earning her Bachelor of Arts Liberal Studies degree with emphasis in American Indian Studies. Graduating with the highest grade point average in her college, 4.0, she was named Commencement Marshall for her May 2000 graduating class.

At the time she was working as a magician, but studying to be a physician. Autumn says, "I was going to magically cut people in half in my show, then really cut them in half at my day job!" As it turns out, however, she found out she faints at the sight of blood. "I should have known," she says. "I did the needle though arm once and I saw stars when the blood started running. This was one of my early clues."

Two years later, she was awarded her Master of Arts in Liberal Studies from the University of Memphis, researching both Native American herbal medicine and American Indian poetry and literature. Yes, another 4.0.

Her Master's Thesis, "American Indian Cultural Survival: Resistance in the Diaspora," won the Distinguished Special Project Award from the University of Memphis.

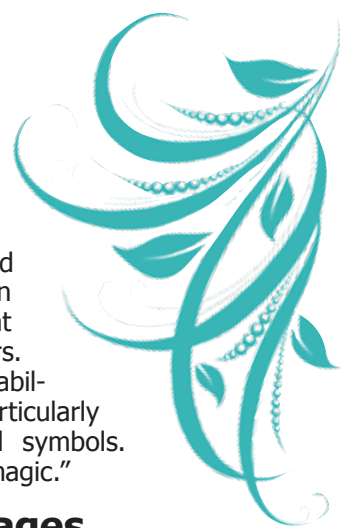
Unquestionably intelligent and intellectually inquisitive, Autumn will be the first to tell you that this is not as easy as it appears. She has a significant learning disability that is similar to dyslexia, particularly affecting math, numbers, and symbols. "This is why I struggle at card magic."

Speaking of Languages

On the flip side of the math equation is Autumn's extraordinary facility with languages, a skill set that has served her well. English is Autumn's native language, in which she is fluent and articulate – a definite must for her cultural storytelling. She also speaks four other languages: Choctaw, German, Japanese, and French.

"Before I even got to Germany," she says, "I had a tutor translate and record my scripted show so I could memorize about forty percent of my show in German. I was told I didn't need that, but I did it anyway. I prepared the same way for my shows in Japan and France. Everything in my show is completely scripted, translated, and committed to memory so I can imitate it perfectly."

The ability to speak five languages ought to be enough to get you around the world. In Autumn's case, it does. Her venue locations have included: Japan, France, Germany,



Sweden, England, Canada, Mexico, Italy, Switzerland, Lichtenstein, Netherlands, and Bahamas, forty-four U.S. states including Alaska and Hawaii, and over thirty different Native American Indian Nations. Her show has varied in size from a tiny show lit by ten flashlights on her own reservation to a personal close-up show for Bon Jovi, to over 20,000 people at the Delta Center in Salt Lake City.

Intensive Magic Studies

Ongoing education is a way of life for Autumn. She is constantly looking for ways to improve her shows, explore new opportunities, and develop new skills and techniques that she can incorporate.

In the area of intensive magic studies, Autumn credits her long-ago magic shop job at Zeezo's in Denver for the magic education of a lifetime. Many magicians have added to Autumn's knowledge of magic, including Gene Anderson, Dondrake, Doug Henning, Curtis Kam, Bob LaRue, Lamont Ream, Shimada, Phineas T. Spellbinder, Gary "Godzilla" Thompson, Dai Vernon, and many more. Magical inspirations include: Ronald "Kotah" Dayton, Gene Poinc, and Ed Solomon.

In the process of remounting her stage show after returning to the U.S., Autumn invited nearby friends and fellow magicians Bob LaRue and Lamont Ream to share their thoughts and ideas. Bob explains the process this way, "The weekly meetings/practice/rehearsals were a wonder. Autumn encouraged new perspectives on the illusions, the storytelling, and the process of creation. Her cast was a delight to work with. Each meeting opened with paying homage to Native Americans and their love for their homeland, and then the other magic began."

Autumn's formal magic education includes Jeff McBride's Magic and Mystery School in Las Vegas, where she studied Marketing for Entertainers and Levitation for Parlor and Stage. She also attended the intensive course Focus on Magic and Masks, taught by Jeff McBride.

She is a member of many clubs and organizations, both here and abroad, including several magic organizations. Autumn is a member of Denver's Mile High Magicians Society, the S.A.M., the I.B.M.'s Order of Merlin, and Hollywood's Magic Castle.

In 1986, when Autumn was applying for a Magician mem-

bership at the Magic Castle, it was necessary to audition. As she looked out from backstage to see who she would be auditioning for, she thought, "That looks a lot like Dai Vernon." Turns out she was right.

What's Love Got to Do with It?

While living in Memphis and going to school, Autumn toured for a week in Germany. She was at the Nuremberg International Airport, preparing for the long flight home, but found her flight had been cancelled. Frustrated, she went to the gate to wait. She had no idea she was about to meet her future husband, Brian, whose flight had also been cancelled.

She had already changed her deutschmarks into dollars and was trying in vain to find a place that would accept her dollars to buy some tea because she was really thirsty. "I'm pushing these big magic trunks through the terminal and noticed this guy following me. I had about three hours to wait when he poked his head around the corner and said, 'I see you've had a really difficult day. May I buy you some tea?'"

"I thought, 'He doesn't look like an ax murderer' so I let him buy me tea. We really struck it up, conversationally. He was unlike any person I'd ever met. We discovered that we would be on the same plane with seats directly across from each other, with an empty seat by him. I had very little magic in my pockets, due to the new TSA rules. All I had was Scotch and Soda and a thumb tip, but that's all I needed. He was absolutely amazed. We were in love by the time we got to Amsterdam."



Brian and Autumn (Photo by Lois Saum)

At the time, Brian was a captain in the Army, stationed in Germany. Autumn recalls, "We courted for nine months, flying back and forth across the Atlantic, and got married May 11, 2002, on the Memphis Queen riverboat, while cruising down the Mississippi River. Ours was a Choctaw-style ceremony with military mixed in." After the marriage, they went back to Germany, where they lived for the next six years.

Walking the Talk

Autumn credits Jeff McBride and Max Maven with the idea of integrating her heritage with her magic. When Autumn first started doing magic, she was performing in a tuxedo and tails. Why? "All my role models were men," she explains.



*Autumn and the Professor, Dai Vernon 1987
(Photo by Curtis Kam)*

"But then Jeff and Max took me off to the side and said, 'You know what, Autumn. You need to incorporate your culture into this.' And I thought, 'Omigosh, I'm going to run afoul of everybody I know.' But they kept pushing me.

"Finally I ran the idea past my peers, past my family, and past the elders. They considered my request at some length. The theme that ran through everyone's answer was, 'As long as you don't exploit the Sacred, you will be fine.'

"So I make sure all of my stories are given to me with permission from my two tribal nations. I make sure everything is accurate. And I make sure the stories are told properly, because you can only tell certain stories at certain times of the year. This way I stay in balance. The people who work with me in the show bring respect, honesty, and integrity to the table. I strongly believe this is reflected in our stage presence.

"Storytelling itself is a sacred art and it's a powerful educational tool," Autumn explains. "I combine my stories with singing, drumming, flute playing, and dance, and illustrate them with the magic of illusion." As one audience member said, "If Autumn tells a story about winter, it snows! If she tells a story about birds, real birds appear! She brings her stories to life with magic."

Culture through Illusion

You would never mistake Autumn's large stage show, *Shadow of the Wind*, for a typical, traditional magic or illusion show. Her opening act includes levitating buffalo skulls, masked characters, multiplying feathers, Blackfeet regalia, and powerful symbolism, performed to haunting Native American music.

Her forty-five-minute show is designed for the Indian casinos around the country that hire her to entertain their VIPs. The casinos want the audience entertained, but in and out quickly so they can get back to the gaming tables. When she's hired for convention centers or a big evening event, those are always ninety-minute shows. In the forty-five-minute show, there's a minimum complement of four in the cast. In addition to Autumn and her husband, the other principal cast members include Reina Shadow Dreamer and Michael Soaring Eagle. In the ninety-minute show, there are six cast members.

She explains, "I use ordinary magic in an extraordinary way. Essentially I create story vignettes performed to music. When creating this show we looked at the different illusions I had and thought, 'What does this illusion make us think of? How can we fit this into a cultural scenario?'"

A wonderful example is Autumn's unique cultural twist on the classic Hindu Basket, called The Basket Dance. Instead of the attractive female assistant going into the illusion, it's the white guy; in this case Autumn's husband Brian, in a U.S. Cavalry uniform, who gets the swords thrust through the basket. Brian is a big, well-built guy and it's a tight fit for him in their standard-size basket. A couple more milkshakes and



Autumn in an oil painting by Ed Kucera

it could be a problem.

Another example is the Crystal Casket, which basically looks like a big aquarium. "When we finished, it became a museum display case that worked into an amazingly funny vignette called Day at the Museum. Our security guard plays a goofy 'Barney Fife' style character, who falls in love with a pretty native doll, a lonely artifact in the museum case. Meanwhile, two Native Americans try to liberate the precious doll, *Mission Impossible* style. This addresses contemporary issues that native people face.

"Even though it's just a glimpse, my show still puts a realistic face on our culture, and allows people to see Native Americans as human beings and people who still exist today. Afterwards, in the meet-and-greet, they find that we can communicate eloquently in English as well as in our own native language. We are planting a seed for people who don't have a reference point other than Hollywood movies and sports mascots.

"I'm so thankful that Brian is talented; he's a real ham on stage. My other cast members are really funny too. But when we need to be serious, we're serious. There are a couple of pieces in the show that can take you from knee-slapping laughter to our finale piece called The Year of the Monkey. This vignette is beautiful, amazing, and so touching.

"The Year of the Monkey is about a man who leaves his wife behind to go to Vietnam. This piece honors veterans and is so moving that there's not a dry eye in the house. In fact, many times when we've done this piece, and we line



up for the final bow, you can see tears on the faces of my cast members."

A few of the other illusion vignettes that have found their way into Autumn's show include Mavila, a Conquistador/Choctaw Indian encounter done with a Metamorphosis; an Asrah levitation that uses no table base, a Broom Suspension that uses war lances instead of brooms, and a Shadow Box made from a Tipi.

Interspersed with the larger illusions are smaller stage effects. She does a hilarious version of the Gene Anderson Newspaper Tear with a story about ecology. She even uses an audience volunteer who tears their own smaller newspaper.

Autumn uses a custom pottery-style Lota Bowl as a running theme in the show because water is a part of native and Blackfeet tradition. "I use the Lota because Blackfeet people find water to be precious. I always pour out the water because it's traditional. If you don't have water, you can't have life."

When asked what she would like her audience members to be thinking about as they're leaving her show, Autumn thoughtfully replies, "I want them to see the magic of how everything is related: To walk out into the night and see the Green Corn Moon levitate across the sky. I want them to whisper my stories of enchanted birds, ancestral traditions, and smooth brown turtles as if they were incantations. Perhaps in the stillness of a summer night they will feel compelled to walk barefoot down a moonlit country road and search for the magic that connects all beings in the Circle of Life."

Shows, Lectures, and Workshops

Autumn offers a number of other specialized and audience-specific workshops, programs, and lectures. Her program, "Ancient Stories and Other Well-Kept Secrets," is unique to the educational world and customized for libraries and schools. She does low cost/no cost presentations for poor and underserved libraries each summer. Her favorite area is the Mississippi Delta.

Autumn's corporate show, "The Magic of Native America," is cultural entertainment designed for executive audiences. Autumn points out that her presentations are not just shows about Native Americans. "These are shows about everyone! Native people value the importance of all people on this Earth and our relationship with each other. We have many more similarities than differences."

Her lecture for magicians is called "Make Your Show Unique!" This workshop helps magicians identify and create a unique stage character by using universally recognized archetypes to define and create an enchanting one-of-a-kind show. She also teaches magicians how to generate unique storylines and routines to match their character. "These shows, lectures, and workshops take me around the world and back. At this point, I have performed for over a million people worldwide!"



Who is that Masked Woman?

Her name is well-known among her clientele but, for the most part, the name Autumn Morning Star is one of the best-kept secrets in the world of magic. However, that's changing.

Autumn is currently booked as one of the featured headliners on the public show at the twentieth annual Magic in the Rockies convention in Fort Collins, Colorado, October 3-6. As part of that weekend, Autumn also will be presenting

her lecture, "Make Your Show Unique!" It's not too late to register for MITR: www.magicintherockies.org.

Jeff McBride says, "Sometimes it astonishes me how long it takes the magic world to wake up and realize an extraordinary talent like Autumn Morning Star. I have watched her arts develop over the last twenty-five years to create powerful magical theater pieces. Autumn's skill set weaves inspirational storytelling, symbolism, beautiful magic, masked archetypes, and evocative music into a rich tribal tapestry that is theatrically stunning."

Magic as Reincarnation

Autumn sums up her life in magic and her love of magic this way: "If I had died twenty years ago, I would have already lived ten lifetimes with what magic gives me. I travel the whole world on a shoestring and stay in some great places. Magic provides me with everything I need. Magic pays all my bills; it's paid for my education; it's raised my daughter, Red Fawn. Magic gives me the ability to express who I am and educates hundreds of thousands of people about who Native Americans are. The wonder of magic tells Native American kids that they can achieve their dreams."

"My life of magic is the most amazing profession in the world."

Life Moves in Many Great Circles

Over the years, Autumn has often thought of The Great Arturo, the magician who first plucked a quarter from her brother's ear. One day, several years after becoming a professional magician and returning from a tour in Japan, Autumn decided to return to Shreveport to see if she could find him – even though she didn't know his real name.

Autumn went to the old neighborhood. "I wanted to tell him I was a professional magician. I wanted to thank him for starting my interest in magic. I went door-to-door, but couldn't find him. Then, I remembered him telling me about a Doll House illusion he was building. I didn't know what that was at the time, but it sounded cool. Finally, one magician



in Shreveport told me he bought a Doll House illusion from a local guy named Arthur Frank. I said, 'Quick, give me his number!'"

Autumn called him, saying, "Do you remember me? I am the little girl who lived on the corner! You taught me magic!" Autumn was in town to perform six shows at the Red River Revel in Shreveport. She asked The Great Arturo to please come to one of her shows. "I don't know," he said, "I really haven't been well."

Autumn scanned the audience in all six shows, looking for what must be a really old man. "I was just so sad. I was sure he didn't make the show," Autumn recalls. "Then, as I'm coming off the stage for the final time, there's an old man standing on the steps. His hand trembled when he reached up to me and said, 'Little girl. You have a quarter in your ear.' We both burst into tears." ★

Photos by Stephanie Jerome

Lindsay Smith is a fifty-six-year member of the S.A.M. Since 2006 he has been the copy editor and proofreader for M-U-M. He hopes there are no typos in this article.