

Justin Rivera

A magic act

by JOSEPH PIMENTEL / AJPress

WHEN Fil-Am Justin Rivera performs on stage, it's the crowd's laughter and faces full of surprises that keep him going.



"It's that feeling I love," says Rivera. "I love watching their faces and seeing them laugh or shocked at something I do. It reminds me of being a kid again, like seeing a magic trick that totally fools you for the first time."

People will have a chance to see this rising 25-year-old magician from Chino Hills when he opens the *Comedy for a Cause* at the Glendale Civic Auditorium this Saturday, June 20. The charity event benefits a Filipino founded non-profit organization called Angels of the Valley Hospice Foundation.

Fresh from his first national TV appearance on Comedy Central's *The Gong Show with Dave Attell*, Rivera is on his way up in the entertainment world. Besides performing on Comedy Central, he's performed with comedians Jo Koy, Edwin San Juan, Ron Josol, Joey Guila and ABS-CBN's *Slanted Comedy* for MYX-TV.

But unlike Koy, San Juan and Guila, Rivera is a comedian with a twist. Rivera is a comedy magician.

"You don't see a lot of us out there," he says. "Some people have said that my style of comedy is an ethnic version of the Amazing Jonathan but with less blood and better magic."

And he admits that it's a fine line to keep the audience laughing and surprised during a performance.

Rivera learned how to do magic when he was six years old. He recalls that from a very young age, he was drawn to magicians Lance Burton and David Copperfield. Recognizing this, his parents, originally from Manila, bought him a magic starter kit from a toy store and the precocious six-year-old couldn't stop tinkering with it.

"It was just the amazement," he says. "When I would watch them, their tricks would just totally fool me and I just had to know how to do it and how to perform it. It's like a puzzle. You look at it and you want to solve it and do it yourself."

By the time he was seven years old, Rivera was already performing in front of his second grade elementary class. For Halloween, Rivera would dress up as his favorite magician wearing a top hat, cape and bow tie. At 12, Rivera was charging \$75 an hour to perform his magic act at birthday shows and family parties.

But it was when he was 13 that took his magic act to a whole new different level.

Hanging out with a few friends at a magic shop, a person recognized Rivera's act and advised him to join the Magic Castle's Junior Program.

The Magic Castle Junior Society is an exclusive program for promising young

magicians between the ages of 13 and 20.

Rivera says it's one of the most difficult places to be admitted.

"Everyone in to magic knows about the Magic Castle. It's the Mecca of magic," says Rivera. "It was pretty hard for a young kid to get into."

During his audition, Rivera remembers performing in front of a seasoned magician for five minutes. He did a magic act with doves.

"I made them appear out of coat, handkerchiefs and scarves," he recalls. "Now, that I think about it was pretty impressive for a 13-year-old. I was doing some Lance Burton stuff."

A month later, he received his admittance letter in to the prestigious Magic Castle.

"The junior program was great," he says. "They had workshops and the veteran magicians would guide and work with you with your act."

Fork in the road

Throughout high school and college, Rivera continued his passions for magic. The money he earned from weekly magic gigs offset the cost of books and tuition.

His parents thought that magic was just a hobby. However, Rivera felt differently.

"There was a point in time when my parents were telling me that I had to get a job and a stable income, to save money," he says. "But I love magic. It was always at the back of my head."

During his last year at UC Riverside, Rivera performed at the Improv. It was his first stage comedy magic performance. He followed his parent's advice and lined up a job as a pharmaceutical sales person after graduation. But he knew that he couldn't pass up at a chance to perform on a big stage.

"I killed it," he says. "The audience loved me. I did really good."

He followed through working as a pharmaceutical rep for a couple of years after graduating with a business degree at UC Riverside but when his contract was up, he pulled a rabbit out of his hat and decided to pursue his magic career.

For the past few years, Rivera has continued to hone his comedy magic act.

He knows that magic is not what it used to be. The days of one-hour magic shows like Burton and Copperfield on a primetime network have been replaced by "mentalism and mind reading acts like David Blaine and Criss Angel."

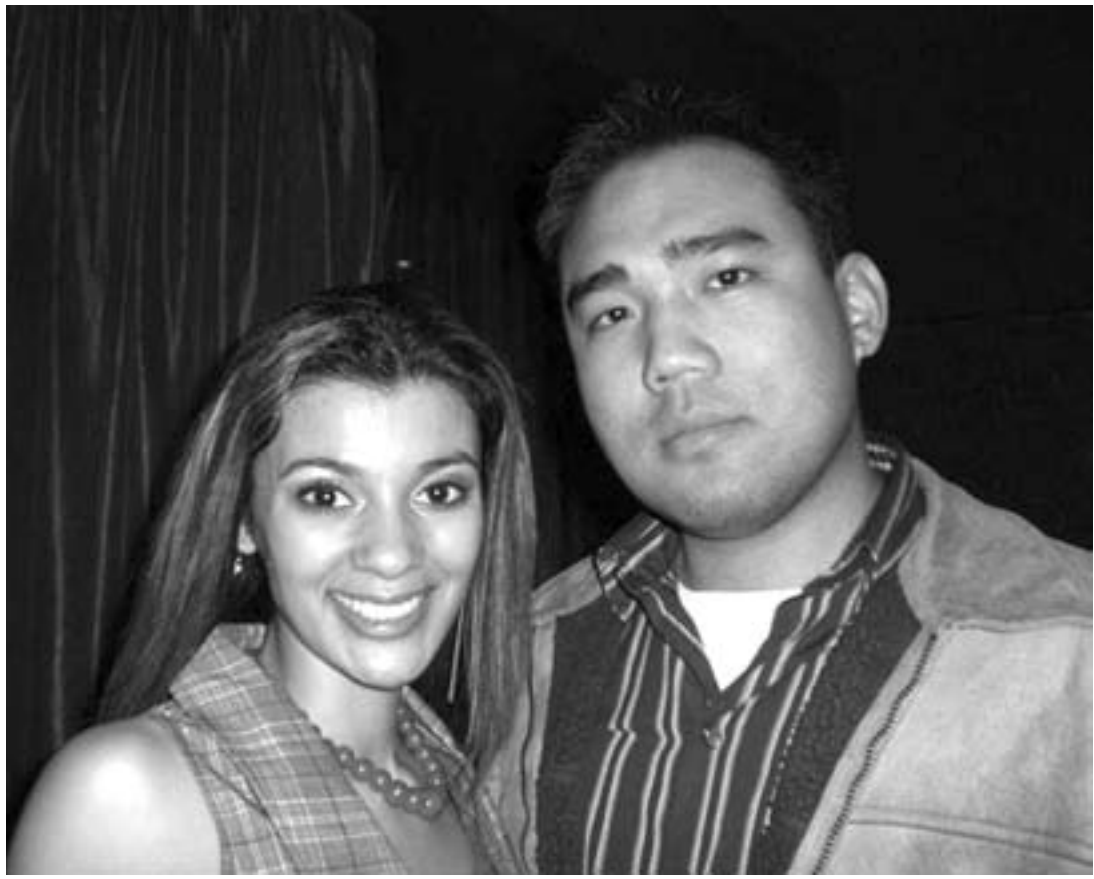


Galing Pinoy showcases the triumph of the Filipino spirit - the Filipino's innate perseverance to rise above. A double entendre, Galing Pinoy literally translates to both coming from (or brought to you by) the Filipino and Filipino ingenuity.



Yet, people still love that feeling of surprise when they are fooled, he says.

"That's my motivation," he says. "To keep that going, to keep the magic that I grew up with and keep it alive and perform it in front of all the masses." ■



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