

Inside the Mind of Mentalist Christopher Grace
By: Marlo Jappen

Christopher Grace darts across the stage of the Plaza Theater at the Boston Center for the Arts. His show is called the “Blindfolded Mad Man,” so he must play the part. He selects a member of the audience to blindfold him: a leggy blonde with chunky heels who towers over him. Sharp-tongued and sharply dressed, he sports a suit with a black-and-white polka dot handkerchief tucked inside his breast pocket. His sleeve tattoos peek out from underneath his jacket, and his brown hair is styled and shaved on the sides. He looks like a punk rocker thrown into a corporate job-- Hot Topic meets J. Crew. Two silver dollar coins cover his blue eyes, which the blonde secures with a generous helping of duct tape. He instructs the audience to write down a question about themselves and fold it into quarters. A stagehand collects the folded papers in a bowl.

Chris scans the crowd and selects a young man. “Your name begins with an N,” he says, his voice booming. “Are you Nate?”

“Yes.”

“This question has something to do with your job.”

He nods.

“Don’t tell me. You work at a school. You work with kids. It’s music. You’re a music teacher.”

“How did he know that?” Nate murmurs. “I only wrote ‘Teacher’ on my card.”

The seventy audience members remain silent; they’re stunned. It seems like Chris has supernatural powers. Perhaps he was bitten by a radioactive spider.

Chris continues the routine. He reads a question from a pre-med student named Ryan who wants to know where he'll attend medical school.

"I can't answer that," Chris says. "That's the point. See, what I'm doing has nothing to do with psychic ability. I can't read your mind. It's a trick. What I do is just completely normal. Do you guys want me to do another one?"

"Yeah!" the audience roars in unison.

During the show, Chris accomplished feats that seemed impossible – guessing people's drawings while blindfolded, naming a word that someone had chosen from a 100-plus paged book ("I memorize the pages in the form of mental photographs."), and solving a Rubik's cube in record time.

"I was blown away," says 22-year-old Nate Porteous. "He knew facts that I didn't even put down on paper, which was weird but really fascinating. It made me curious as to how he does the things he does. A lot of people who do shows like these imply that they're psychic. But, I appreciated how upfront he was because I'm not one to believe in mystical things."

Chris is a mentalist. No, he doesn't know what you're thinking. And no, he can't make your wife disappear. (Stop asking.) Mentalism is a branch of magic that uses psychological techniques to give the illusion of a sixth sense. But unlike famous mind readers such as Criss Angel and "Long Island Medium" Theresa Caputo, Chris admits what he does is a trick. "I do the same techniques as them," he explains, "but I don't say that I'm real. It depends on my personal ethics. It's just not my style. You're taking advantage of people's misery and heartache. That's exploiting people." Instead, he wants his audience to know that what he does isn't impossible. "Anybody can do this as long as they put the time and effort into it," he says. "It does take a long time to get good at it. Years." Many of his routines require memorization, reading body language, conveying subliminal messages, and in short – practice.

Chris sits across from me at a busy café called the Thinking Cup and sips a mug of French hot chocolate. The café fills with noisy chatter as crowds of customers squeeze between close-together tables scavenging for a seat; Chris is overwhelmed.

“It’s like sensory overload in here,” he says in a tone much quieter than the one he uses onstage. Because the 30-year-old has been performing mentalism for more than 15 years, he’s sensitive to his surroundings. “When I see somebody, I scan them,” he tells me. “It’s like Sherlock. You immediately see all of these bullet points pop up when you look at somebody.” The downfall, Chris says, is turning people into a statistic instead of an individual. “You have to work around that and talk to the person as opposed to what you see them to be.”

He sulks over an anonymous review he received earlier that morning on a private magic forum about a lecture he delivered. “He said I ripped people off and took material that wasn’t mine,” Chris says. “He was so wrong. I’m still thinking about it. It made me really upset, but I’m trying not to let it get to me.” Although he received all stellar reviews on YELP, he cannot remember any of them. “If you ask me to name a negative review, I could probably tell you verbatim what somebody said.”

Chris will never explain how he “reads” people’s minds. “That violates the Magician’s Code,” he says. “The number one rule is to never tell how a trick is done.” Instead, he prefers people to figure it out themselves. “Think about it logically,” he says to me. “How would it be done?” After a few unsuccessful guesses, Chris fails to move on. Finally, I give up. “I don’t know,” I say. “I don’t think like that.” “Most people don’t,” Chris replies. “That’s why it works.”

Chris asks me to write down the name of somebody that I care about. "Use capital letters and don't let me see it," he says. Then, he asks me to concentrate on the name. "Was it a female name? It's not a relative. It's a friend from back home. A?"

I nod.

"It's not Anne. It's not Alice. It's A-L something. Think of a word that begins with the next letter." He watches me intently. "Yellow," he says. "That would mean it's Alyssa."

"How did you know that?" I ask.

"You gave me the answers," he says. "A lot of the times I look at people's lips." Skilled mentalists detect how people slightly move their lips to form the word that they're thinking about.

Chris demonstrates another technique called misdirection that involves planting a subliminal message in someone's mind. After he tells me to think of a number, and guesses it correctly, he reveals that he motioned the number to me. "It was so quick, you didn't realize it," Chris says. Isn't this violating the Magician's Code, I wonder. Chris is aware of his contradictory nature.

When I challenge him with the daunting task of describing himself in one word, he settles with "complicated." He's honest and deceptive; private and open; funny and serious.

Chris grew up in Boston, which can be implied by his correct pronunciation of “Worcester” as “Woohster,” his incorrect pronunciation of “Stop” as “Storwp,” and his self-proclaimed stubbornness and short-temper. “It kind of comes with the territory,” he says.

His interest in magic began at the Marshfield Fair when he was five years old (a handheld mirror depicting the fair’s racetrack is tattooed on his arm). While his family sold food (including hot dogs wrapped with bacon) to fairgoers, Chris made friends with magicians and performers. By the time he was ten, he performed his first show at a Salvation Army for senior citizens. At thirteen, Chris transitioned into mentalism after reading about it in books.

After graduating from Quincy High School, he took a year off to perform. Then he studied behavioral psychology at Cape Cod College in hopes of learning skills he could apply to his craft. As a sophomore, he transferred to Harvard where he studied business for a semester and a half. Colleges and corporations across New England booked Chris to perform at their events. These shows required travelling during the week, which meant he missed a lot of classes. “It just wasn’t really feasible for me to continue, so I left,” he says. “I always regretted it. But, it was for a good cause. It wasn’t like I left because I was lazy.”

Far from lazy, Chris averages about 300 shows a year. He travels the world and performs private parties, some for notable people including Steve Martin, Johnny Depp, Tom Hanks, and the late Steve Jobs. But, he says kids are his toughest crowd. “They’re so critical,” he says. “They will tell you how you did something. They’re usually wrong, but sometimes they’re right. If you can perform for kids, you can perform for anybody.”

He has a child of his own --- a nine-month old named Jack. Chris met his wife Lindsay, as he likes to say, “the old-fashioned way.” They dated online. He often uses Lindsay as a guinea pig for his routines because she gives him honest feedback.

He'll demonstrate card tricks for her, and he most recently used her to test a routine called xenoglossia, which involves causing someone to speak a language they've never seen before.

It can be difficult for Chris to be away for long periods of time, such as when he toured Singapore for six weeks last winter. But, since these trips help him provide for his family he feels they're justified.

He takes out his iPhone 6 Plus every so often and lowers his head to admire his background, a photo of Jack. "Whenever I'm not home, I get a gut-wrenching feeling of missing him," he says. "It's awful. It's a completely different life. Now I have a purpose that's more important than me. I can't be so selfish anymore."

While Chris is confident and boisterous onstage, offstage he is reserved and quiet. "I think I'm more me on stage," he says. "Offstage people kind of annoy me. They're selfish, rude, ignorant, and annoying. When I'm onstage, people are nicer."

Offstage, Christopher Grace is Christopher Bolter. He started using Grace as a stage name as nod to the icon Grace Kelly. "I never liked my last name in the context of performing," he says. "It just felt weird for some reason."

Like many performers, Chris is introverted. He admits to having only two close friends. "If you were a friend of mine, it would take you a while to get to know me and really be comfortable with me," he says. But, performing allows him to let go. "I get to interact with people, which I never had a strong ability to do," he says. "Being on stage is a drug. When you come off, you have this endorphin rush."

Chris says it can be difficult for performers to articulate their emotions once they're offstage, which is why many have depression. "You're struggling so hard to be

recognized that sometimes it eats you alive.” He went through a bout of depression from 2005 to 2009 when he was in the middle of a bad relationship, which he refers to as the “relationshit.” “It sucks. It really does. You don’t know what to do and you feel hopeless and miserable. I would sleep during the day and I stayed up all night.” Chris says the relationship ended badly. “From there, things took a drastic U-turn and turned around.”

On a Saturday afternoon in Marlborough, M.A., Chris sits in his home office where both Bolter’s and Grace’s worlds collide. His walls are decorated with wedding photos of he and Lindsay, framed paint-splatters made by Baby Jack, promotional posters of past shows, and pictures of British mentalist Derren Brown.

The room is a reflection of his overactive mind. It’s busy, but everything has its place. Each kind of prop is stored in a labeled compartment --- playing cards go into one drawer, and kids’ magic tricks into another. Directing my attention to a wooden device he refers to as a Judgment Box, Chris tells an elaborate story about how it was once used to determine whether or not a person was a witch. “That story isn’t true,” he says. “I made it up.”

Lindsay watches the smiling baby in the living room as he plays with colorful blocks. She’s a psychologist at a nearby High School (“She makes a more serious difference. I show people their potential and how cool the mind is.”).

Lindsay thinks his logical approach to his craft fits well with his personality. “I think that causing people to think about things differently or in new ways is very much a part of who he is,” she says. “He gets away with a lot on stage,” she laughs. “Like being sarcastic and making smart ass comments.”

Although Chris' profession involves getting inside other peoples' heads, he's often stuck inside his own. "It's kind of hard for him sometimes to separate himself from other things," Lindsay says. "To stop the train of thought that's already in his head and focus on whatever else might be going on."

It's naptime for Jack. Chris enters the living room and grabs a Goofy stuffed animal. He cradles the baby in his arms and carries him off to bed. Afterwards, he and Lindsay plan to run errands. It's easy to forget that Chris is an "everyday" person, since he's so deft at making it appear like he can do the impossible. "If you know how to talk to people, and persuade people, and push a conversation in a certain direction, you can do things that you wouldn't think you were able to do," he says.