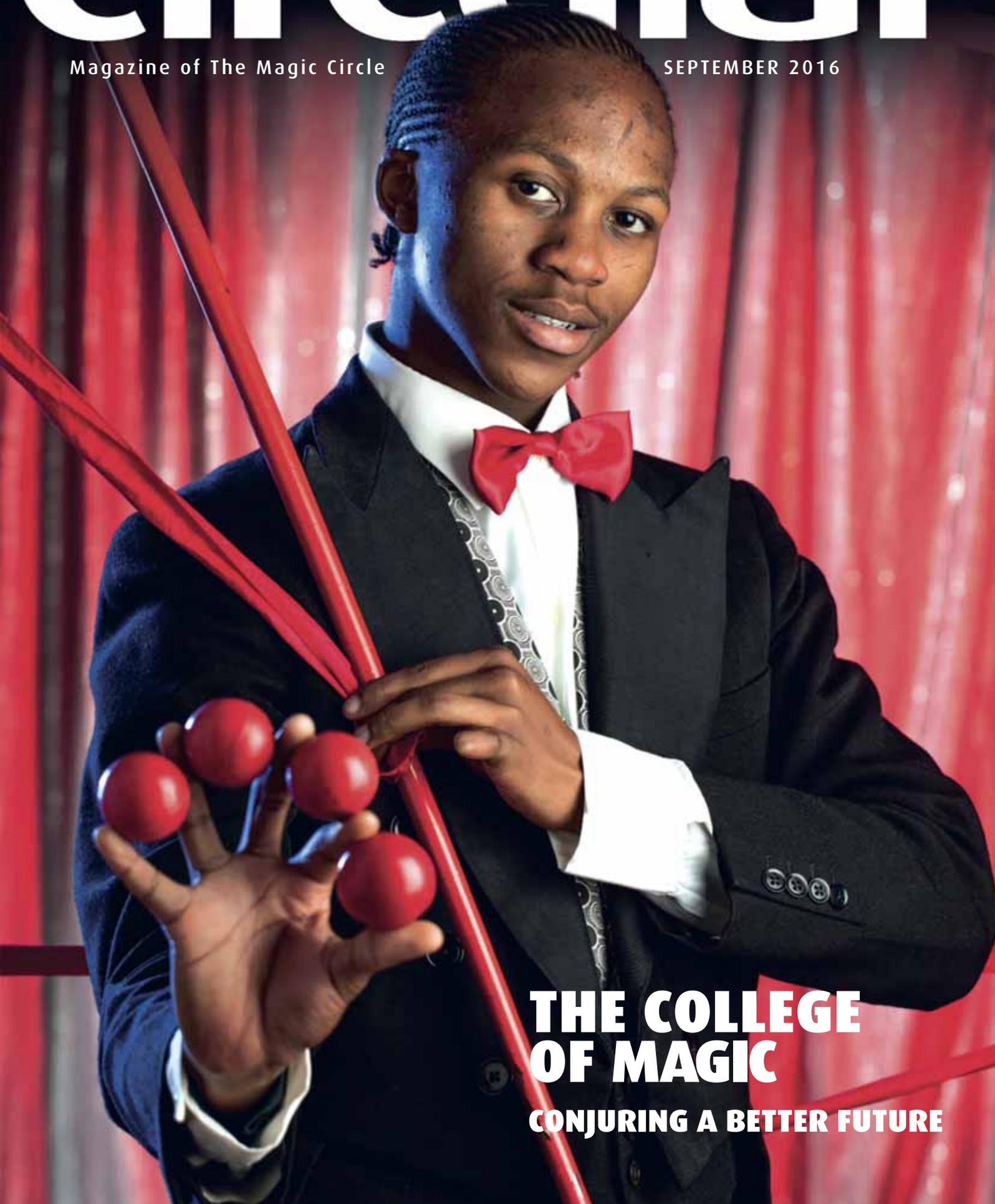


THE MAGIC

# circular

Magazine of The Magic Circle

SEPTEMBER 2016



**THE COLLEGE  
OF MAGIC**

**CONJURING A BETTER FUTURE**

# THE COLLEGE OF MAGIC

## CONJURING A BETTER FUTURE

by Guy Hollingworth MIMC

**"M**agic is really alive in South Africa at the moment," David Gore, founder and director of the College of Magic, tells me. "We're getting the feel that things are happening."

It certainly felt that way when I attended the 2015 SA Magic Convention in October. The GrandWest Resort and Casino in Cape Town was packed with magic enthusiasts and busy professionals from all over the country. Graduates of the College like Stuart Lightbody and Olwethu Dyantyi gave world-class performances. Bryan Miles, another graduate, was recording a 13-part TV series which is currently airing. And, since my visit, a regular Monday Night Magic show has started in Cape Town.

Things were very different when David started the College. "Television only came about in South Africa in 1976. And then it was only two hours per day on one channel. In the 1980s, we literally had only two channels of television – and that was very strictly under government control. David Copperfield was probably one of the first magicians to get onto South African television. We didn't see any of the UK artists like Paul Daniels because of the

Equity boycott. We didn't have any magic shops. We were not only geographically isolated, but we were isolated from seeing magic. So the youngsters who wanted to learn magic didn't really have an opportunity."

That prompted David, at 19, to don top hat and tails, perform some magic for a local newspaper, and announce that he and a colleague were starting the "College of Magic." Its doors opened to 34 students in February 1980.

Almost more remarkable than it being a college of *magic* was that it was a *multiracial* college. I had visited South Africa once before, in the 1980s at the age of 11. I dimly recall water fountains marked "Whites Only" and separate entrances to buildings for blacks – if they were allowed in at all. As David reminded me, "At that stage South Africa was still steeped in the apartheid times. I was brought up in a very liberal family. We were fairly politically active and not in favour of the government. So one of the things which we did right from the beginning was to establish a college which was open to all races. Many of the young people that were attending wouldn't

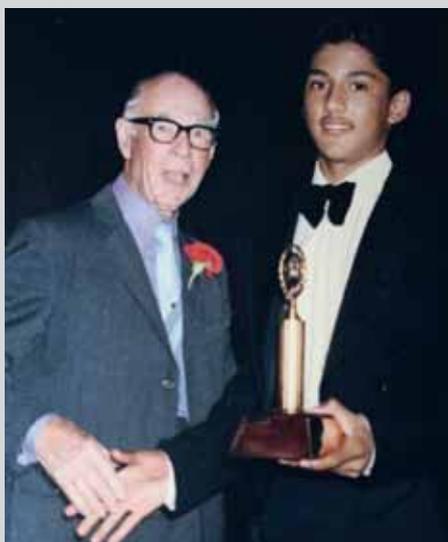


Celebrating the College's 35th birthday

normally be able to mix with young people from different racial groups in social life or at school. They wouldn't be able to travel on public transport together to the lessons or go to each other's homes afterwards. But the College of Magic became that sort of meeting place."

Things have of course improved since then, after the National Party lifted the ban on the ANC in 1990 and released Nelson Mandela, which set the country on foot for the democratic government in 1994. But the extent of the progress can easily be overstated and the reality overlooked. On my return visit in 2015, thanks to the generosity of my hosts David, Marian Williamson and Craig Mitchell, I was cosseted in comfortable hotels and driven through clean and safe districts to international restaurants with beautiful views over the Bay to Robben Island, now a tourist attraction. The GrandWest resort felt much like a Las Vegas casino, with themed restaurants and bars, all-you-can-eat buffets and an indoor hacienda-style food court with an artificial outdoor sky. Only the walk-through metal detectors at the entrances and the sign reminding me that "handguns must be checked" hinted at the tension that still exists in the real world.

When not accompanying visiting overseas magicians, David and the rest of the staff at the College (currently about 40, mostly volunteers) do not confine themselves to the comfortable parts of Cape Town I was shown. "Many of our youngsters come from a very deprived background. We've been into many of their homes. These informal settlements would



1985 – Dr Harry Harley presents David Gordon with his Student of the Year Award at the Annual Graduation



2000 – David Berglas presents David with the David Berglas Millennium Award for Outstanding Contribution to the College of Magic



normally consist of corrugated iron to make very small shacks in the townships. The families would wallpaper the interior with newspapers or wrappers from products to try insulate them as best they could. But the conditions are certainly not what we would consider as comfortable. There's no running water, the sanitation is very poor. There's very little by way of electricity. So the shacks are very dark and dingy inside and generally very close to each other so there's very, very rarely a garden or outside area. So when they're coming out of their living conditions, they are literally on the street.

"Also, the AIDS pandemic has wreaked havoc in our communities. Many of our youngsters come from either single parent or child-leading households, where an older sibling or a cousin is running the establishment. Fathers are incredibly absent in the upbringing of our marginalised community members and the absence of the male role model for the young students, and especially the young boys, is very apparent. So there are a lot of challenges to living in those circumstances besides just the physical ones: being so close to other members of the family, living almost on top of each other, particularly if they have somebody in the home who's either on substance abuse or whose behaviour is counterproductive to their development."

"And these townships can also be dangerous, especially at night time. The crime statistics are very high. There's not a week goes by without one of our students being mugged. I

mean, every week one of them comes in and they've been held either at gunpoint or at knife point. We instruct them to give their things away. Just give them. We can replace their items and magic props but the physical harm they're going to get is too much. Crime has spiked and impacts on them tremendously. Some of them have had to stop going to school because it's in an area that's too dangerous to get to."

The front few rows at my lecture had been reserved for current students of the College, a mixture of ages and races, but uniformly attentive, polite and immaculately turned out (there is a dress code for students). The interest

they showed, the intelligence of the questions they asked and the camaraderie that clearly existed between them, gave no clue as to the enormous challenges that many of them faced on a daily basis. Somehow, attending the College seems to have had taught these youngsters much more than just how to vanish a silk in a thumb tip.

"It started off with just teaching magic to young people who wanted to learn," David confesses, "but we very quickly realised the benefits of learning magic – I think that came more from the parents who said 'wow!' Things were happening at school: academic achievements and even sporting success. People ►



**The African Legend in action at the Festival playing to a capacity audience**



**David along with Eric Eswin and Craig Mitchell congratulate Monica Nyakatya on achieving success in the Stage Magic Contest at FISM Africa**



**A group of students and graduates in the cast of the Traditional Children's Magic Festival held at the College of Magic in July 2015. This festival lasts for 4 days and is run annually**



**Performers in the Robert Harbin Theatre downstairs at the College of Magic create magical moments with the Impassable Illusion**



**David emcees for the FISM Africa Entertaining Children Contest at the Artscape Theatre in Cape Town**

were being released, their self-esteem and their self-confidence was growing. Magic was playing a very valuable role not just in developing life skills and social interaction, but in the growth of tolerance and understanding. Magic was bringing very, very diverse people together from all races, creeds, religions, different persuasions, all around a common interest. And that is so valuable because they then develop their understanding, their tolerance of each other. It's that very process that South Africa is so desperately in need of."

"As we started realising that, we set about establishing the College as a non-profit organisation. We saw the role of using magic as a tool for education and for transformation. And that's very much where we've landed up."

David's quiet modesty and understated tone could give the impression that this has all come about almost by happenstance. But a visit to the College itself gives some insight into the time and effort that he and his team have dedicated. The staff room has the detailed curriculum for the courses posted on the walls, and the teaching materials neatly filed in numerous labelled drawers. These are not courses which run for a few hours over the

summer. Astonishingly, the curriculum comprises six years of graduated training (three years for juniors and three years for seniors), with each year consisting of 30 classes. How on earth do you put together that much material?

"I think it was initially maybe a couple of evenings brainstorming what we thought at that stage would be an outline of a course," is David's characteristically understated answer. "We've changed a lot over the years too. We've really tried to select effects which we thought would bring principles home to the youngsters and would develop certain skills, like performing skills, as opposed to just selecting magic effects which we liked or thought were spectacular."

"One of the biggest challenges with any young person is motivation; and we really have a wonderful tool in magic because magic certainly excites young people. But to actually motivate them to put in the effort and energy that's required to develop the work ethic and self-discipline to take their magic to a level which is good for the art and good for themselves – it's those techniques and tactics which we enjoy developing."

Most of the curriculum classes run on a Saturday morning. In order to keep them small

but to accommodate the 180 students currently enrolled from all areas around Cape Town, there are typically about 5 sessions run during the morning. But David is keen to point out that students can also join other courses: "There are supplementary courses like juggling, mime, and clowning, puppetry, and ventriloquism. Those extra courses are optional but for many of our students they will join everything and spend the entire Saturday morning with us attending all those classes. And when they become senior students we have technical courses, stage



**Olwethu adds a musical touch to the magic act**

lighting and sound and digital film making. And those extra courses... sorry am I going off again?"

His enthusiasm, even after 36 years, is palpable. "If I were to get some time off for a sabbatical, like some people have had" – a knowing reference to the six months I had taken off work during which I had gone to South Africa – "I know what I would do. I would be working on our curriculum. I'm still incredibly inspired. We become quite excited about how to develop a young person through magical training."

In addition to the classes on Saturdays, the College is open throughout the week for students to come in, often after school, to work on their performances, to get ready for competitions arranged by the College, to work on school projects or simply to socialise.

"For our students from deprived backgrounds, the College of Magic is an escape from those conditions. It gives them a home from home – a place to go to. We create facilities here which allow them to conduct themselves after school hours, whether it be eating, academic support, working on computers, pursuing their performing and even just being able to store their magic props here. It's not just the magic. We are trying to give a certain amount of social support for these young people alongside the magic."

The senior course is split into three modules: close-up magic, stage magic, and children's magic. Students are required to study all three, partly to give them the chance to understand them all before deciding where to specialise; but partly for practical and commercial reasons.

"The opportunities on stage are very small in South Africa. And yet, especially for our marginalised students, they love the stage magic. Their movement is so good with music and they aspire towards that. But you've got to be really good before you can start earning on stage. Whereas, with children's magic, there certainly is a bit of market here in Cape Town and throughout the country, where they could make some good money entertaining at children's birthday parties. And then in close-up magic for corporates and for restaurant work – as well as with street magic and being able to just go and busk – there's a wonderful earning potential there for our young people too."

Since 1992 the College has operated from a sizeable late-Victorian house in Claremont. Prior to that, it rented premises. In 1990, the landlord tripled the rent which, whilst seemingly disastrous at the time, gave David the boost to move the College to a permanent home.

"We realised so often the projects here in

South Africa are very fleeting, they're here today, gone tomorrow. And the idea of having a permanent place was very attractive not just for our organisation but from a therapeutic point of view for our young people who were attending. Eventually we came across the building we are currently in. It was completely dilapidated, as the military had used it as civilian headquarters during the apartheid time – there was still a tank in the grounds! We approached the government and asked if we could rent or use it. At first they all said no but eventually they agreed, although they didn't have keys for it, so we had to break into the building. So we just occupied it with the government's blessing. Later they put it onto the open market for public tender, and we weren't in a financial position to purchase the building, so it was a big concern for us. So we started lobbying to try and get an out of hand sale to the organisation.

To cut a long story short, it did go up for public tender but there was an intervention from the Minister at the last moment and we were able to

**Sonwabile on the unicycle**



purchase it."

When I visited, the picturesque double-story colonial house with wrap-around porches, now lovingly restored over many years, was filled with students rehearsing in the 40-seat theatre downstairs, chatting in the library/social room and in the magic shop, and busying themselves in the Imagination Centre dedicated to David Berglas in recognition of his longstanding support. Only the upstairs video and sound studios were quiet, the focus for the students currently being on perfecting their live acts ready for competitions at the Convention.

The College managed to pay for the building in full by 2010, which contributes towards its sustainability. But funding – which David describes as the biggest magic effect the College performs – remains a constant concern. Fees are charged on a sliding scale to certain students whose families can afford it, but more than half are from marginalised areas and are fully sponsored. So only about a sixth of the College's annual spend comes from fees. Shows organised by the College bump its income up to about 30% of what it needs, but the remaining 70% comes from fundraising.

"There's a lot of generosity, and I'm always very humbled by how many people contribute to making our organisation work. We've had lovely support over the years from the UK. David Berglas has been involved in a lot of different projects. And the support of Dr Harry Harley, a Member of the Inner Magic Circle who had moved to South Africa in the 1970s, was very important when we founded the College, especially as we originally had some opposition from local magicians. Siegfried and Roy established a grant in 1997 of \$5,000 per year, which they have generously continued over all these years. We get small government grants which give us credibility, occasional funding from our National Lottery, and from corporate sponsors within South Africa. What we've been building up now which we're quite excited about is the Sponsor a Student program ([www.sponsorastudent.co.za](http://www.sponsorastudent.co.za)), which allows people to sponsor a single student for 5,000 Rand (about £220) through the training for a full year. That's growing and we're excited because it broadens and stabilises the support base financially. We now have sponsors from all over the world – including a lot of magicians who are closely following the progress of a particular student. And those students are very proud because they've got somebody they can relate to. They feel special being looked after."

"But the truth is we are desperately trying to get ourselves to a stage where we could become self-sustainable so we don't have to



**Vuyolwethu and Siphesihle add illusion to the show.**

depend on other people's charity. One of our big goals is to try and establish an educational endowment trust for the organisation from which our basic running costs are covered. We could then do the extended projects as and when funding becomes available. Whereas as I sit here at the moment, our Board of management is quite concerned that we're not even going to be able to last until December this year and keep the lights on. And that becomes a real worry. I mean, I employ people here and that's a concern."

The range of areas in which College graduates have succeeded is conspicuous. Magicians like Bryan Miles, Larry Soffer, Jacques Le Sueur, Stuart Lightbody and Olwethu Dyantyi are regular performers on the Cape Town circuit. Riaad Moosa and Stuart Taylor are well-known stand-up comedians in South Africa. Conrad Koch is a ventriloquist who, with his political puppet Chester Missing, is a household name. David has noticed that

trailblazers such as these have created opportunities for students following behind them to prosper, which is encouraging more people to get into the entertainment field.

"We've also got those who've moved into the movie industry, both behind the camera and in front. We're very proud of one of our graduates, Jenna Bass, whose debut film won three awards at 2014's Durban International Film Festival. We saw her recently and she's busy planning her next film. And then we've got those who are acting, like Francis Chouler who was in *Eye in the Sky* with Helen Mirren and Alan Rickman."

Many others have become teachers (a huge number of graduates also volunteer to teach at the College), gone into business and trained as doctors. How does learning magic so dramatically transform young people's lives?

At a simple level, many enrolling students are Xhosa-speaking (as Johan Ståhl learnt during his lecture at the Convention: one young volunteer, when asked for his name, delightedly

responded with a series of flummoxing clicks, to the great amusement of everyone but, perhaps, Johan). "One of the skills which they certainly develop at the College is becoming very adept at speaking English. And that commercially is a very powerful skill for them to have in any job market. Many of them will talk about that as being a key element."

"Others will just say that magic gave them 'the edge.' It wasn't that they were performing magic but, having been through their magic training, they really believed that the skills they gained gave them the edge in a very competitive environment with other individuals."

But David sums up the effect of magic in a way that I think applies to everyone – privileged barristers in London no less than marginalised communities in Cape Town. "Careers are changing dramatically in the Twenty-First Century. More and more they are involving not just information, but creative use of that information. So creativity is becoming more and more important as we're going forward."

"And that creative way of thinking, which magic inculcates and nurtures, I think is incredibly valuable. It's that faculty of just thinking out of the box and being completely crazy that our students are going to be able to take into the workplace in whichever careers they choose. And in the South African environment where the situation can be so dire for some of our young people, creativity and imagination is what gives them the ability to hope for the future. It allows them to imagine a better future, it allows them to imagine beyond their circumstances. And for that I think magic is just such a wonderful gift." ●

**To find out more about the College of Magic, offer your support or assist in any way, visit [www.collegeofmagic.com](http://www.collegeofmagic.com) or contact David Gore at [info@collegeofmagic.com](mailto:info@collegeofmagic.com)**



**Graduation in 2014 (David in centre)**