

Metro

BIG bands and card tricks might seem an odd combination, but to Roger Clark it makes perfect sense. "We opened Dizzy's some years back, and it's always been a place which supports the arts," he says of the Richmond jazz club. "We have tap dancing once a month, people hang their art on the walls. And when some friends of mine said, 'Why don't we put on a magic show?', I thought, why not?"

Why not, indeed.

Now, every month or so, Clark's big band alternates with a group of Melbourne magicians who swallow razor blades (and regurgitate them), produce coins and cards from thin air (or perhaps from behind the ears of audience members), do unbelievable things with pool cues and balls, and, on occasion, make lit cigarettes disappear — a trick that Clark modestly mentions he has mastered himself.

"I've always had a little bit of interest in magic," he says. "A chap I taught saxophone to was a very talented magician, and we sort of traded lessons. He taught me a few things — nothing for public presentation, but making lit cigarettes disappear, things like that. I really love that sleight of hand."

Clark says the combination really works. Essentially, it's just two kinds of theatre. "It makes for a very good night," he says. "The band plays a set, then the magicians come out, go round the tables. Some do close-up, some do a stage routine. So there's the music, then the magicians do their theatre. And there's a fellow, Al Cappuccino, who does a kind of gangster routine. So usually in the last set the big band will play along with him, the theme from *Peter Gunn* or something like that. All the guys in the band really enjoy the night, too."

"Like the circus, magic is evolving," says Al Cappuccino, aka Enzo Ficco. "They're both centuries-old performing arts. Now we're developing new ways to deliver what are centuries-old tricks. We've changed the performance style, we've introduced characters, a story-line. People enjoy getting lost in a story. It becomes a bit like musical theatre."

Ficco has developed a 15-minute act orchestrated to 1930s-style music. "I appear as a gangster, in the pinstripe suit, with the violin case. There's a bit of visual comedy. The selection of tricks should have a relationship with your character, and the story-line."

The 40-year-old father of two was destined to be a magician. His uncle was a renowned illusionist in Milan in the early 1950s. He died when he was 45, in 1965. "That was the year I was born; I was named after him, and a lot of his equipment and memorabilia were passed on to me," Ficco says. "When I was 13, my father encouraged me to study magic. And that's how it all began."

He'd love to do it full-time, but, sadly, "magician" rates below even "actor" and "artist" in the employment stakes. "Apart from anything else, it's not practical with all the travelling that'd be involved," he says. "So I work at the State Trustees, and do the magic when I can."

Also living a double life is Simon Coronel, the organiser of Dizzy's magic nights, who also teaches sleight of hand at the CAE. That's by night. By day he's an IT consultant. (And, yes, he has business cards for both.) His introduction to magic was rather more prosaic, but he's just as passionate about the arcane art.

"I was 18, I'd just enrolled at



Dizzy spells out of thin air

A Richmond club better known for jazz turns its hand to magic, writes Melinda Houston.

Melbourne Uni in an arts/engineering degree, and it was orientation week. Hundreds of clubs had their tables set up, and I joined the Melbourne University Magicians Society — along with a heap of others." It was some months later that he finally made it to a meeting, late. "And a guy was halfway through a card trick that blew my mind," Coronel says. "I got hooked there and then."

Other members of the club began to tutor him. He raided libraries for magic books — "It's amazing what you can find in suburban libraries" — scoured the internet, watched magic on

television and went to any live show he could. "There is no Hogwarts in Melbourne," he says. "You just have to pick it up where you can. For the first time in my life, I had a hobby. I was addicted."

Coronel admits magic tends to attract "introverted nerdy types" — a club of which he happily claims membership. "Magic has always been a kind of underground, niche thing. And attention to detail is important if you're going to be any good." Which is to say, trainspotters welcome. And while Coronel does have classically pale, long-fingered, mobile hands, he says

manual dexterity isn't essential. "But what you do need is patience and determination."

After muddling through his first years of public performance, (other student clubs, kids' birthday parties), he decided to ramp things up a bit.

"To get a polished act together I needed to perform," he says. "An illusion only happens if someone is watching. I don't actually make cards disappear — you just think they disappear. So you need an audience."

He heard about Dizzy's original show, and decided it sounded like just the ticket. "So I called

them (Dizzy's) and asked if they were interested in putting on another one, and they were. I called around a few people, it became a group night, and now it's semi-regular. We've done seven or eight this year."

As well as a chance to develop his own skills, Coronel says the night has become a terrific training ground for up-and-comers.

"There'll be a guy there this time who is incredible," he says. "Neil Vinson, he's only 15 or something, a real wunderkind. He does what they call XCM, which is extreme card manipulation."

What you won't see are gentle-

men in top hats and tails accompanied by their scantily clad "lovely assistants".

"Hopefully, you can forget any mental image you have of what a magic show is," Coronel says. "No rabbits, no bow ties, no coloured handkerchiefs. But you will see things appearing and disappearing, changing, transforming."

"You'll see things that astonish you. Things that make you go, 'Wow.'"

The next big band and magic night is at Dizzy's Jazz Club, 90 Swan Street, Richmond, on Wednesday at 7pm. Tickets: \$12/\$8. Tel: 94281233.

Magician Simon Coronel, who runs a magic course at CAE. PICTURE: MARINA OLIPHANT