

Lifestyle

'ALL GROWN UP'

Sociologist advises baby boomers on developing a relationship with their adult children in new book.

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Hub street artist Gazzo gives passers-by a dose of acerbic humor



By CARA NISSMAN

A lithe young woman strolls along the cobblestones at Faneuil Hall on her way into Quincy Market. Suddenly, a cocky cockney accent spouts out, "Have you been good? Yeah? That's why you're alone!"

A teenager unwittingly steps into range. "Pull up your pants," the curt Brit says as he hikes up the kid's baggy jeans. "You should be proud of your hand-me-downs."

Who is this insult artist? It's Gazzo, a renowned Boston street performer whose best trick is making political correctness disappear.

"I don't believe in political correctness," he said. "I'm not homophobic or racist. I'm not vicious. I just have an aggressive comedic style."

Gazzo, who grew up in Oxfordshire, England, is as nebulous about his name as he is about his routines. As

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BRITWIT



STAFF PHOTOS BY MATTHEW WEST

WHAT A CARD: Gazzo pulls a stack of cards from his mouth. A crowd gathers as he performs at Quincy Market, right. Gazzo requests a kiss from audience member Rachel Engle of Baltimore, top right.

Magician rebounds with humor, con-do attitude

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a teenager he learned the tricks of the "street con" trade from the notorious London street-scam artist Cracker Parker.

"My parents didn't know, but we met every Saturday," he said. "I learned the psychology of it. I was fascinated with that type of environment."

But Gazzo quickly realized that being a "T boy," or lookout for men who scammed little old ladies out of their pensions, was not his cup of tea.

"Fleecing the public was not what I wanted to do with my life," he said.

But having already abandoned school by age 11, he found his alternatives were limited. He decided to turn legit. "Now I'm doing it legally, with the same aggressive style."

Gazzo has traveled worldwide for 25 years, performing three-card monte and cups-and-balls routines in outdoor malls and buskers festivals. For about 18 years, he split his time between Boston and Key West, Fla. Only recently did he decide to perform permanently in Boston's Faneuil Hall, citing low crime and "great tips."

More important than the top tips, Gazzo's wife, Kristine, lives here year-round, and Gazzo wants to help bring up his 9-year-old boy, Chaney.

"I want my son to do whatever he wants to do, but education is very important," he said. "I've had no formal training. I can't read and write. I wish I could speak different languages. I wish I could help my son with his homework."

"But I am what I am," he said. "And I'm the best at what I do. If you don't believe me, just ask me."

His eyes twinkling mischievously after each zinger, Gazzo, sporting a black bowler hat and Union Jack vest, performs four to five shows daily. He makes fun of everyone while self-effacingly executing magic tricks.

"I don't care if you don't like me," he said, putting as a couple passed by his card table. Yet to another reluctant spectator, he warned, "Lady, don't turn your back on me: Remember how Lincoln got it."

Not everyone appreciates Gazzo's crass comedy. Just a few weeks ago, a spectator complained to the magician's manager.

"A guy (about 45) had a big hole on the back of his head where his hair used to be," said Gazzo. "I said, 'You have a hole in your toupee, sir.' He was very, very sensitive."

But Gazzo's fans are quick to defend him.

"He says offensive things, but it's just part of the show," said Mike Bilotta, 20, of Brock-



STAFF PHOTO BY MATTHEW WEST

SHTICK IT TO HER: Gazzo, a world-renowned street performer and magician, picks on an audience member recently at Quincy Market.

ton, who frequently watches Gazzo entertain after work. "He doesn't leave anyone out — even himself — so if people want to walk away, they need to lighten up."

After being picked on during a recent show, Tom Bowen, 23, and Rachel Engle, 20, of Charleston, S.C., had only praise for the performer.

"A lot of people were embarrassed, but it didn't bother me," said Bowen. "I think everybody gets too uptight about things."

Besides uptight audience members, Gazzo has encountered other challenges. At just 36, he suffered a mysterious stroke while performing in Venice Beach, Calif.

"It ruined me physically, emotionally and financially," he said. "I had no health insurance. I almost lost my family over it because I

was so hard to deal with. Street performing was all I could do, and I couldn't even hold a tennis ball in my left hand. My whole left side shut down."

His fellow entertainers, friends and wife (who fell in love with Gazzo while watching him perform at Quincy Market) helped him raise money to pay his astronomical medical bills and spurred him to return to magic.

It took about two years to recover, he said. "I had to teach myself everything again, because I didn't have the money to do a proper rehabilitation."

Now 42, Gazzo believes he performs his sleight of hand more skillfully than ever. Yet he's growing tired of his income depending on the size of crowds and the weather, so he's planning a venture in which he performs in

bars for tips. He plans to call his business ICON, with the hidden meaning of "I Con." Gazzo also recently collaborated with writer David Britland on "The Phantoms of the Card Table" (High Stakes), a book coming out in October about historic card sharks.

He may be seeking other gigs, but Gazzo doesn't plan to give up street performing, even if audiences seem increasingly thinned.

"Things are changing," he said. "Twenty years ago, there used to be more artists and poets here. Now there are more chain stores coming in. But I'm never going to retire. I pour my heart and soul into every performance, and I'd rather be dead if I couldn't do this."

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