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Intelligencer

The Life Aquatic

What happens when the city's top aquarium man is hired by David Blaine? Either the fish die or Blaine dies. (Or, no fish.) BY ARIANNE COHEN

EVEN MAGICIANS need their marine biologists. In early March, Justin Muir, the city's preeminent luxury-aquarium designer, got a call from David Blaine's people. It was about Blaine's next televised municipal stunt: two weeks in a shark tank on the plaza in front of Lincoln Center! "It was kind of cool," says Muir. "How often does a marine biologist get to put David Blaine in a tank?"

This isn't Muir's first man-tank. His company, City Aquarium, designed the 10,000-gallon, 30-foot fish-filled tank in the now-shut Coral Room (go-go "mermaids" cavorted within). He also built the 30-foot-tall cylindrical shark tank in Vikram Chatwal's Dream Hotel. But none of those required logging this many hours of conference-calling among Blaine's mask people, tank people, scuba people, medical people, Lincoln Center people, and ABC people. Plans changed quickly. The medical people realized that Blaine's skin might not survive two weeks in water and dropped the time period to one week. The shark idea sank, too. "There are fish that are better suited," says Muir. The tank was going to have Caribbean fish. Pretty! But the hottest coral reefs survive at 84 degrees, too cold for a tired, fasting, nonmoving Blaine. Heating it up to keep him alive would kill the fish. "I didn't think it was a good idea for fish to be dying on live television," says Muir. "And no one wanted to sacrifice any animals." Two weeks ago, a compromise plan was floated: Lower the temperature for several hours daily and insert fish. Then remove fish. The fish would be flown in daily from Miami and quarantined for a few days to relax them after the shock of travel, before the shock of Blaine. "It's something we really wanted to do, because it would be really beautiful," says Muir. But fish have their own agenda. "They know what a net is. It would be a battle getting the fish in the tank and out every day. So we decided to scratch the idea."



What's left is a ten-foot tank with 1.5-inch-thick insulating acrylic walls, filled with 2,000 gallons of spring water, to be trucked in from upstate. They're adding salt, to help Blaine's skin. Blaine will spend his week attached to a custom mask supplied with compressed air. He has trained by meditation and extended time underwater. "He is human, and he does need to survive," says Muir. "The core body temperature is the most important issue we're dealing with." Muir will have a staffer on call around the clock, managing power heaters that can raise the temperature one degree per minute. The other issues are more minor. Will Blaine get knocked around? "Well, the bigger the tank, the stronger the return water pump," says Muir, who often enters larger tanks to clean them. "It's like a Jacuzzi jet stream. You can get blown to the other side of the tank." Muir is also charged with maintaining the "pristine clarity of the water... No algae blooms, no bacterial blooms." What about urine blooms? "It's the same thing for fish," says Muir. "The filtration system removes urea, ammonia, and hormones."