

The Boston Globe

A scientific blend of education, entertainment

By Terry Byrne
Globe Correspondent

At a seemingly ordinary magic show,

something goes terribly wrong, there's a scream, and the magician's assistant is unconscious, the apparent victim of some foul play. Suddenly, the theme music for CBS's popular "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" TV show kicks in, and the audience enters the world of forensic science to solve the mystery.

The dramatic scene takes place in the first few minutes of "CSI: Live!" an interactive adventure created by Mad Science to educate and entertain youngsters.

"We create a mock crime, and then it's up to the audience to solve it," said Leonard Lipes, managing director of Mad Science Inc. and the producer of "CSI: Live!," which is coming to the University of Massachusetts at Lowell's Center for the Arts on Sunday. "We find kids are eager and enthusiastic about following the clues and doing the tests. There are so many cool elements to forensic science, it's easy to engage kids."

Mad Science has found ways to get children excited about science for two decades, with hands-on activities that allow them to experience life in a space station, experiment with different gases, and understand organic compounds. Forensic science, which has been growing in popularity, seemed a natural choice for a Mad Science show.

Lipes said Mad Science worked closely with CBS, and "CSI" creator Anthony Zuiker to make sure "the stage production fits the network's story standards and Mad Science's educational values.

Although the television show usually involves a murder and is geared to an older audience than the 8- to 12-year-olds "CSI: Live!" is trying to reach, Lipes said toning down the gore factor was not a problem.

"We want to draw them in, not necessarily gross them out," he said. "This case doesn't involve a murder, and we get periodic updates on the recovery of the magician's assistant."

The key to making the performance work, he said, is transforming the magic



The cast of "CSI: Live" invites audience members on stage. (Mark Davis/CBS)

show into a mock crime scene, he said.

"As soon as the magician's assistant is carried off the stage, a mobile crime unit pulls up onto the stage, the crime scene is taped off, and we tell the audience this is their first day at Forensic Science Academy," he said. "Since they witnessed the 'crime,' they're already curious about trying to figure out what happened."

To keep the audience connected to the CBS show, Gil Grissom, the television character who leads the Las Vegas investigations bureau, appears on a large video screen and gives the audience its marching orders.

Everything in the crime scene is analyzed, said Lipes, including the gas in the box that held the magician's assistant. The CSI team also involves "recruits" to launch experimental projectiles that might have cut through the box, fire lasers across the crime scene, check foreign substances that might be on the trick saw - all to test theories about who committed the crime and how. Finally, the crime is reenacted.

"We bring kids up on stage for each of the experiments," Lipes said. "They love contributing to the solution."

The show not only entertains, it also

supports the life sciences curriculum in schools.

"We create a teacher's resource manual to offer opportunities for discussions and experiments back in the classroom," Lipes said.

Mad Science bills itself as the world's largest provider of science enrichment programs for children, and its huge franchise network includes Mad Science of Greater Boston, which offers birthday parties and vacation and summer camp activities, as well as in-school programs.

"It's difficult to be accepted into the school systems," Lipes said, "but I think it's a tribute to our educational content that we're embraced by most school systems."

Forensic science, he said, is one of the fastest-growing areas of science today, and he believes it's important that children understand what it's about.

"We're very particular about making sure the science is accurate, but we also want kids to know this doesn't have to be dull and boring," he said. "The real-life applications really turn kids on." ■