

MAGIC IN MIND

ESSENTIAL ESSAYS FOR MAGICIANS



TAMARIZ
TELLER
BROWN
ROBERT-HOUDIN
LAVAND
WONDER
MASKELYNE
CARNEY
ASCANIO
ORTIZ

...AND THIRTY MORE OF THE GREATEST THINKERS IN MAGIC SHARE
THEIR MOST CLOSELY-GUARDED SECRETS.

EDITED BY JOSHUA JAY

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ESSENTIAL ESSAYS FOR MAGICIANS



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Magic in Mind was prepared in cooperation with the Society of American Magicians, and the ebook will be made available for free to all members worldwide.

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Magic in Mind started out as a project intended expressly for serious *young* magicians, but the first of many lessons I learned during my two-year endeavor is this: age has little to do with learning.

It was evident, early on, that this collection would benefit *anyone* serious about getting serious in magic. So here we are.

Thanks to all the generous magicians who have allowed me to include their work in this collection. I am overwhelmed by the support they have shown. In particular, I wish to single out Darwin Ortiz, whose writings I admire greatly, and who went against a personal policy, and agreed to participate. I consider it a favor to me, and a favor to all those who will learn from his writings. Thanks, Darwin, for being flexible and generous.

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"IT IS MY BELIEF THAT MAGIC
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-S. H. SHARPE

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INTRODUCTION

BY JOSHUA JAY

If you could spend time with one great magician, who would it be?

I used to pose this question to myself often, and other young magicians ask me some form of it quite regularly. Like I was when I started in magic, they are in search of a guru, a role model, a hero. But I have come to believe that this is the wrong question.

It is the wrong question because it presupposes that there is just *one* person, *one* path, *one* ideology that we should search for. A better answer to the question, “which great magician do I spend time with?” would be this: *all of them*.

What if you could learn from all the greatest magicians, alive and dead? You can, of course, through their writings.

But this is not as simple, to the student, as it seems. To purchase all the books by all the greats is expensive, particularly to a young magician who has entered the fray. Just those books excerpted in this collection would cost approximately 4000 dollars. Even if our newbie had the money, many of the most important titles are flat-out unavailable. Besides, how would a beginner know

how to separate the best books from the rest, and what to read first?

Some have argued to me that the student's migration from tricks to books is a process, and that finding the diamonds amidst the coal is part of the initiation. This seems cruel to me. Why not give someone the chance to excel and to find his own path?

Magic in Mind is that chance. I have collected what I feel are the very best parts of the very best magic books. Some of the greatest minds in the history of magic share their most guarded secrets here, all with their generous consent. The advice spans nearly two hundred years, thirty authors, and three languages. In the giving spirit, these authors have permitted me to share their wisdom with you; *Magic in Mind* is available to you and all serious magicians *free*.

I gave myself some guidelines for the project: all the material should be theoretical, and nothing over fifteen pages or so. The essays should break new ground or be the definitive treatment on their subjects. And, as much as possible, the advice should do what all good advice does: require interpretation. Whether you're young or old, beginner or expert, illusionist or mentalist, you should find meaning in these pages.

Another piece of advice: don't rush this experience. Pause. Reflect. Consider. Each essay is rich with ideas, but to get the full effect from each one, look up once in awhile, and think about how these abstract ideas can be applied to *your* work.

You will, no doubt, disagree with some of my inclusions and exclusions. That's okay with me. Many magic authors make persuasive arguments, but many of them unwittingly make

the same arguments already made by (and better than) their predecessors.

The book is organized by theme into ten chapters. In much the same way works of art in an exhibition play off one another to illuminate a theme, I have attempted to make essays old and new “play” off each other in contrasting and unexpected ways. I have at several points chosen opposing viewpoints on the same topic. You choose your own fate.

It is not particularly important to me whether or not you agree with this essay or that magician—only that every single essay makes you consider a viewpoint you had not, or that it helps you see something in a new way. I encourage you to seek out the works of those magicians whose thoughts resonate with you.¹ Many of these articles were written in a different era, directed to a different audience. Some you will like, some you will hate. Warren Buffet spoke to this when he said, “Tell me who your heroes are and I’ll tell you what kind of person you will become.”

Magic in Mind is not just food for thought. The opinions you form during this experience will shape the magician you become. Good luck.

Joshua Jay
New York City
2013

1. Remember that these essays are just excerpts—teasers, really—of much larger works. A full bibliography is provided at the end, on page 543, as are URLs to easily obtain the books you are most interested in.

PARTONE



THINKING LIKE A MAGICIAN

"THE VALUE OF THEORY MAY NOT BE SO MUCH IN TELLING YOU WHAT TO THINK ABOUT YOUR MAGIC, BUT THAT YOU SHOULD THINK ABOUT YOUR MAGIC AT ALL, THAT THERE IS A METHOD, A PROCESS."

-JOHN CARNEY

If we are to embark on a journey filled with theory, it seems to me that a logical starting point would be a discussion on why theory in magic is helpful at all. And who better to explore this issue than Tommy Wonder, who was until his last breath in 2006, a living treasure in magic.

THE LIMITATIONS OF THEORY

BY TOMMY WONDER,
WITH STEPHEN MINCH

Since a large part of this book and its companion volume consists of theoretical essays, it seems judicious to consider first what theoretical discussions can do for us and how important a part theoretical concerns can play in the realm of magical performance.

Some may say that theory, nice as it may be, doesn't contribute significantly to the development of a good performer. In support of this they point to many such performers who never practiced theoretical analysis. Indeed some fine magicians have never formally studied the theories behind their work, but rely on some instinctive feeling for what is right for them and what is not.

There are also magicians who study and study, who know a great deal about the theories of magic, but when they apply these theories in their performances they fail to achieve the great magic for which they hoped. From all this one could draw the conclusion that theory seems to contribute little or nothing to the making of a better performer.

RAW DIAMONDS

While this contention is obviously open to debate, I do agree that there is a certain something, an instinctive insight, a raw knowledge, that it is essential to have to become a good performer. Call it talent if you like. The more of this special something one has been given by nature, the better the performer one can become.

I say *become*, because even if one has all the talent in the world, it still must be developed. Talent is like a raw diamond. An uncut diamond is not particularly interesting, but once it is polished to perfection, it becomes a thing of beauty. The same is true of talent. The more talent, the bigger the raw diamond, the better one can become. But it still requires polishing!

Polishing this raw diamond brings out the sparkle and brilliance, so that audiences can begin to enjoy it. However if the base material, the talent isn't there, if instead of raw diamond there is only flint, no amount of polishing, no amount of work can bring out the brilliance of a diamond.

The idea that, without talent, no amount of work can make one a truly good performer may seem pessimistic, even elitist; but I believe it, nevertheless, to be true. However, I'm not really the cynical misanthrope this statement might at first suggest, for I tend to think that most, if not all people have some measure of talent – maybe not much, maybe just a speck; but a tiny little diamond polished to perfection is far more enjoyable than an enormous unpolished one. So don't despair if you find that your "raw diamond" is not huge. Your magic can still be admirable.

I don't believe that one can enlarge one's talent. One can only polish it to bring out its qualities for audiences to enjoy. If this is true, there is really no need to be worried about the amount of talent one has. We shouldn't be concerned with how big the raw

diamond is. There is nothing to be gained by feeling depressed over a lesser stone. We should only consider how well we can polish the gem we have; and we should only feel discouraged if we fail to polish it sufficiently.

I always smile a little when I hear people rationalizing the absence of quality in their work by saying, “But you see, I don’t have as much talent as so-and-so!” I don’t pretend to know exactly what talent is – maybe some do lack it completely – but I do know that the phrase *lack of talent* is often used as an excuse for lack of polishing.

Whether we have talent and how much is something for others to worry about. Let’s ban that fear forever, and let’s also stop using the amount of talent we imagine ourselves to have as an excuse. These things are senseless and will never bring us any closer to our goals.

FEELING RIGHT

One of the best ways I know of to polish the talent one has is to use it as much as possible. In other words, practice and perform magic as much as you can. In doing so, you will come to see and feel almost automatically how you should do things; you will *sense* when it is right. The more magic you perform, the more experience you gain and the more your sense for “what is right for you” can be developed. This sense can become so sharp that, after a time, you will even be able to tell when something is right just by *imagining* yourself doing it. And you will certainly be able to tell when it is right by actually trying it.

Let’s say that you want to work out a new effect, and at home you try various moves and sequences. You do it this way, you do it that way; and suddenly you feel that a particular way is, well – just right. This feeling that something is *just right for you* is, in

my opinion, the primary basis for making decisions, and should never be ignored. Many great performers make decisions about their work solely on what they sense is right for them. They can't explain exactly why they do the things they do in a particular way – but it just feels *right*.

This “right feeling” is a much better, much more secure basis for deciding these things than any theoretical analysis can ever be. Of course, the amount of “feeling” you have will depend on how much natural talent you possess and how thoroughly this sense has been developed. If the sense is very small, then “feeling right” might be a shaky, possibly even a misleading basis for making decisions. If you should fail to develop this sense of rightness, it's probably better to forsake the performance of magic. Before you can hope that intuition will lead you to correct decisions, it is first necessary to develop it as much as you can. The intuition, the feeling, must be developed by intensive practice and performance. If you fail to achieve this development, basing decisions on intuition will be an incorrect approach. One can't base decisions on a sense one does not yet possess.

To place intuition above hard analysis is not a very scientific approach. It's probably not even scientifically defensible; but can our theoretical analysis be scientific? For a theory to be scientifically valid it must be complete and all encompassing. Is magic theory today this complete? And even if someday we do understand magic so thoroughly and precisely that the extant body of theory does encompass all aspects of magical performance, won't that theory be too large and cumbersome to be workable? At any rate, our theoretical understanding of magic today is still limited, and is easily overshadowed by even a moderate amount of intuition or talent. And intuition and talent certainly work a lot faster!

WHY THEORY?

If all the above is true – and I believe it is – then the question must be asked, What is the use of theory? Shouldn't we just forget it and develop our intuition, then just do what feels right? I don't think so; for by doing that we would be discarding an invaluable tool!

You see, after your intuition tells you what to do, theory can become a great aid. Once you have decided that something feels particularly right, thought guided by theory can give you important insight concerning your decision. Understanding why something feels good can lead you to more precise or effective utilization of that insight. Intuition is, after all, an obscure, subconscious process that doesn't offer clear reasons for its decisions. Only through theoretical analysis can we refine, improve and broaden those hazy lessons that intuition presents to us.

Intuition is a great step toward accomplishing good magic, but intuition alone is unlikely to achieve the full potential of the ideas it generates. That is the job of theoretical analysis. However, if theoretical thinking is applied without that first intuitive leap the result can be pure rubbish. It is far too easy to use theory to twist a completely misshapen assumption into something that gives the appearance of being straight. You can do this without ever being aware of it. But all the theoretical patches in the world won't stop a rotten foundation from crumbling when a ramshackle structure is set before an audience. I believe this misuse of theory is possible because our theories are incomplete. We still have so much to learn, and it is highly unlikely that we will ever understand it all.

The main function of theory, then, is to solidify and refine the fruits of our intuition. That is its real purpose. Once we have,

through theoretical analysis, made the vague feelings of intuition concrete concepts, it is much easier to determine if and how the teachings of our feelings can be improved and better applied. Intuition first; theory and analysis second. This progression is essential!

DEVELOPING INTUITION

I began this discussion by observing that best (perhaps the only) way to develop your latent intuition for magic is by practicing and performing it as much as you can. Of this I am certain. I am far less certain of the following thought, but I am confident enough in its possibility to offer it for your consideration. I believe that theoretical analysis, when properly applied as we have discussed, can heighten your intuitive faculties. It is my impression that by having constantly examined those things that have felt right to me in my magic, my sense of intuition for what was right became better and surer. This might be because my mind was made to delve regularly into these matters, and my subconscious subsequently grew more at home with such thoughts and more adept at handling them.

It could be that I'm wrong about this. I can't prove that theorizing and analysis really improve one's intuition for good magic, that they can enhance whatever raw intelligence you might possess – but I suspect that they do. If so, this is an added benefit to be gained by busying yourself with matters of theory.

REFINING THEORY

To broaden our knowledge of theory, it is natural to presume that further thought about these matters will deepen our understanding of them. And it certainly can. However, it is also possible to carry such exercises too far: to focus on a certain theory and, in an attempt to elaborate and, in an attempt to elaborate on it further and further, wind up with sheer nonsense. I don't believe that theory alone should be the basis for elaborating further theory. The true basis must always be well-grounded intuition.

The surest source of new theoretical ideas lies less in the theories themselves, and far more in your sense of what is right for you. Exult in those moments when, as you analyze your intuitive feelings, you suddenly understand something, something new, something that can be added to your theoretical knowledge. Also watch for those times when you discover a bit of knowledge that can change or refine existing theories. This is the way our theoretical knowledge grows. And the greater that knowledge becomes, the better able we will be to understand our intuitive thoughts, and to handle those thoughts and make the most of them.

NO RULES

From this it follows that theory should never be used, or should I say *abused*, as if it were a set of rules to be slavishly followed. Never permit theory to become dogma. This can only lead to disaster. Our theoretical knowledge is far too incomplete to forge rules from it. However, theoretical knowledge can and should be used as an aid to furthering our understanding of intuitive insight, and for this

our theories don't have to be complete or totally encompassing to be of value.

Some individuals who haven't sufficiently developed their latent intuition might come to the conclusion – and quite rightly – that their feelings can't be trusted, that intuitive decisions too often prove wrong in performance. This of course undermines their trust in their own sense of rightness. Others may have different reasons for lacking confidence in their intuition. No matter what the reason, deprived of this confidence, such people may be attracted to theory as a means to compensate. This is perfectly understandable, but regrettably it won't lead to consistently desirable results.

If you don't trust your intuition, you must learn to develop it, work with it, have faith in it! Heed your feelings, don't ignore them. Understand the importance of intuition and the subordinate importance of theory. If your intuition turns out to be wrong time after time, it only means that it is still underdeveloped – or that the talent simply isn't there. Remember, the size of one's talent can't be enlarged; but keep working and, if there is a little talent in you, the day will come when you find that you can trust your intuition more and more, and that your intuitive decisions more frequently turn out to be right.

Theory is extremely important – but it can never be more than an aid, a tool for crystallizing and refining natural intuition; and as such it must always come second to that intuition. Your intuition!

Tommy Wonder

The Books of Wonder, Volume 1

1996

TOMMY WONDER

Holland's Tommy Wonder was the rarest kind of magician: he was equally talented up close or onstage, and equally influential with regard to his work and his theories. His background was in dance and theater, and all his work had an element of theatricality to it. Wonder's inspiring attention to detail is evident in every aspect of his performance. *The Books of Wonder*, from which we will excerpt several times in this collection, are his two-volume legacy, and worthy of careful study.



Thanks to Mr. Wonder, we now have a basic understanding of how theory can be useful. It's almost time to start talking about our magic.

But before we do that, let us consider a more fundamental question: what is magic?

Magic means different things to different magicians. And the way you define magic will dictate the way you perform it.

Roberto Giobbi defines magic as “the theatrical art of wonder obtained through complex means using natural science, psychology, drama, specific principles, and digital dexterity.”

Nevil Maskelyne defined it differently: “Magic consists in creating, by misdirection of the senses, the mental impression of supernatural agency at work.”

And Ferraris Folletto gave us this rather blunt definition: Magic is “the art of @#\$\$%ing with people without seeming like you are.”

But for me, Charles Reynolds said it best: “Magic is the theatrical art of creating the illusion of impossibility in an entertaining way.”

The way you define magic will, more than anything else, affect the way you perform it.

ON A DEFINITION OF MAGIC

BY CHARLES REYNOLDS

"MAGIC IS THE THEATRICAL ART OF
CREATING THE ILLUSION OF IMPOSSIBILITY
IN AN ENTERTAINING WAY."
-CHARLES REYNOLDS

Magic is one part of theatre. It is a show given for the entertainment of an audience. Bernard Beckerman (Chairman of the Department of English and Theatre Arts Program at Columbia University) has, in his illuminating book *Theatrical Presentation*, made the distinction between three basic types of shows:

1. Shows of Glorification: parades, festivals, etc.
2. Shows of Skill: circus, juggling, acrobatics, etc.
3. Shows of Illusion: drama and magic

Drama and magic, the only two types of shows of illusion, have many things in common (such as "the willing suspension of

disbelief," which we will discuss later) but they approach them in quite different ways.

Every magic effect can be thought of as a combination of two types of story. The first of these is the tale of wonder: the fairy tale, the myth, the dream. Magic accepted on this level — as story-evoking amazement and astonishment — fills a human need. It satisfies the audience's appetite for marvels, its deep-seated desire to believe in the miraculous and in a dreamlike world in which (to quote physicist Michael Faraday) "Nothing is too impossible to be true."

Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, in his stimulating book *The Forgotten Language*, discusses those elements which are stored in the subconscious mind as "the common origin of dreams, fairy tales, and myths," and Carl Sagan in *The Dragons of Eden* quotes a fifth-century philosopher as saying that "Myths are things that never were but always are." One could not find a better definition for the effects of magic.

This is, however, a second type of story that is told by every magic effect. It is more akin to the detective story, but instead of asking, "Whodunnit?" it asks, "How was it done?" Audiences can react to either of these elements in a magic performance or, more often, to both of them at the same time.

In a magic show, the impossible apparently becomes possible but the audience knows it is an illusion. The audience can either try to figure out how it is done or they can willingly suspend their disbelief and enjoy the illusion as entertainment. To the inveterate puzzle-solver, to whom a magic performance is a win-or-lose game in which the cleverness of the performer is pitted against the analytical ability of the viewer, this is sadly, a very tough idea to sell.

Robertson Davies, the celebrated Canadian novelist – whose Deptford Trilogy (*Fifth Business*, *The Manticore*, and *World of Wonder*) has a magician as one of its major characters – touched upon this in a lecture given in 1992:

What is magic? Is it not the production of effects for which there appear to be no causes? Behind all magic there is an explanation, but it is unwise to seek it too vigorously; there are lots of things in life which are more enjoyable when they are not completely understood. A good piece of magic is a work of art and should be respected as such; it is a flower, not an alarm clock, and if you pull it to pieces to find out what makes it work, you have destroyed it, and your own pleasure.

The true magical experience should be more about wonder than about wondering (a distinction pointed out to me by sociologist Marcello Truzzi). Magician Simon Aronson has astutely noted that, “There is a great difference between not knowing how something is done and knowing that it can’t be done.” It is only the second of these situations that satisfies the audience’s appetite for marvels — its deep-seated desire to believe in magic. Many magicians consider their job to be the performing of “tricks” (albeit entertainingly) in order to deceive their audience. I believe that this attitude does more harm to magic than any other single factor.

The immortal Robert-Houdin defined a conjuror as “an actor playing the part of a magician,” and fundamental to the theatrical character of the magician is that he possesses magic powers. It is doubtful that there is any human being who would not like to have magic powers that could be commanded at will, so a theatrical performance which evokes those feelings can be a very powerful one.

The operative word here is “power,” because, from primitive man to audiences of today, the appeal of magic is intimately related to the subconscious desire to control the often intractable world in which we live. (This, incidentally, explains the strong appeal of magic to children of ages seven to adolescence, who are involved in solving the problems of power in their own lives.)

The “power” aspect of magic is also responsible for creating the major problem in successfully presenting it as entertainment to an audience. While everyone would like power, no one likes to have another person have power over them. If someone is “fooled” by a magical effect, it follows, all too logically, that they have been made a “fool” of and, even worse, that they are a “fool.” If they are amazed by a magic “trick,” it follows logically that they have been “tricked.” No one likes to be “tricked.” It is a demeaning experience. Let’s face it - deception has had bad press all the way back to the Garden of Eden.

But is magic really deception? I don’t think so. Instead of being deception, magic is the control of perception for the purpose of entertainment. For real deception to occur, it is essential that the audience not realize that they are being deceived. When a person plays the Three-Card Monte or the Shell Game, as soon as he realizes that he is being bamboozled by sleight-of-hand, the game is over (or should be).

The task of the magician is to make his audience enjoy the impossible because it is impossible, not because they believe it is true. If all art is, as Picasso asserted, “a lie that tells the truth,” then magic is not excluded.

British author Martyn Bedford, in his provocative novel *The Houdini Girl* (1998), points out that the difference between the liar and the magician is that only the liar depends on being

believed: "The magician merely conceals the method of his deception; for the liar, this is not enough - he must hide the very fact of it. Another essential difference: once the methodology - the trick, if you like - is exposed, magic ceases to be magical, while a lie remains a lie even after the liar is caught out."

The initial problem of every magician, other than mastering his craft, is how to diffuse the puzzle aspect of the magical experience, or at least make use of it. There is no doubt that puzzles can be entertaining but only as a challenge to be solved; in magic, if the puzzle is solved, the magic ceases to exist. To treat magic as a contest in which the magician attempts to outwit the spectator is to totally sacrifice the emotional appeal of wonder to the strictly intellectual appeal of the puzzle.

It is, of course, futile to wish that the puzzle appeal of magic will simply go away. For most of the audience, it will not. The only answer is to bring the mythic (right brain) appeal of magic and the puzzle (left brain) appeal into some kind of balance, like the arrow and the bow, and out of this dialectical tension, to create a uniquely magical experience.

If, as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus told us some half a millennium before the birth of Christ, "Beauty and truth are to be found in the tension between opposites," then perhaps this is

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-S.H. SHARPE

where the magical experience is created: in the tension between heart and head, between emotion and intellect.

Good magic, like all art, is a celebration. It celebrates mystery and wonder and the irrefutable fact that we do not know all the answers and that often it is sufficient to simply know the questions. We do not, after all, have to solve the puzzles, and magic, in symbolic form, celebrates many of life's puzzles such as birth (the rabbit from the hat) and death and possible resurrection (the lady sawed in half and restored again) that remain unsolved.

The good magician, who entertains through his personality and his presentation, presents seemingly impossible feats that (as the Reverend John Booth has pointed out) increase man's respect for the mysteries of life. The purpose of the magician's performance is, for a brief period, to reinvest life with a sense of mystery and wonder and strangeness. That is a great need and it is taken away from most of us at a very early age.

Jean Cocteau observed that "The theatre's nobility is compounded of mystery." To the degree that magic, a small but not insignificant part of the theatre, can embody that mystery, it will continue to speak to its audiences as it has for thousands of years.

Charles Reynolds

Mystery School

2003

CHARLES REYNOLDS

Charles Reynolds (1932-2010) was a respected behind-the-scenes magical thinker. He invented several illusions for both stage and television, and is renowned for his long-time creative partnership with Doug Henning.

I had the honor of having the fine points of this essay explained to me across the table from Mr. Reynolds, in the library of his home in Greenwich Village. He spoke with passion on this subject, and rarely broke eye contact. "Here," he said to me afterward, "I wrote an article on what I'm trying to tell you. So you won't forget."

I haven't forgotten. And now, hopefully neither will you.



“There is a world of difference between a spectator’s not knowing how something’s done versus his knowing that it can’t be done.” This simple, beautiful turn-of-phrase forms the foundation of Simon Aronson’s definition of magic—a definition that points to an ideal of deeply impossible material that the spectator completely understands but cannot comprehend.

THE ILLUSION OF IMPOSSIBILITY

BY SIMON ARONSON

The essence of magic is “doing the impossible.” The “doing” is accomplished by the performer, but the “impossible” must ultimately be supplied by the audience.

That one has witnessed the impossible is a conclusion, a judgment, a determination that must be reached by each spectator — and this requires the active participation of a spectator’s senses and his mind. A spectator must first be convinced that he is aware of all that has happened: that he has been attentive, that he’s followed everything, that nothing has escaped his notice.

That conviction will then be contrasted against the spectator’s awareness of the laws of nature and the laws of logic — laws which he “knows” like the back of his hand. The resulting dichotomy is the determination of impossibility: he knows what has just happened, and yet also knows that it cannot happen, that it defies the controlling laws that govern our world. And yet, you did it.

A magician’s paramount goal is to manipulate the spectator’s mind and senses to bring about this state of impossibility. You’ll deceive him in any way you can, but you must produce both components, or else the magic will be lost. If the spectator

feels he's missed something, or that you're "quicker than his eye," or that something was confusing, then he will not reach the certainty, the absolute conviction, that he knows what happened. Alternatively, even when he's convinced that he's carefully followed everything, if he thinks the subject matter is beyond his ken, that it's susceptible of some kind of scientific explanation (even if he himself can't articulate it) — indeed, if he believes there's still any room for possible theorizing — he will not reach the conclusion of impossibility. The magician must affirmatively raise and destroy any hypothetical solution which the spectator might be likely to consider. The spectator must be actively engaged, so that his own mind and senses together eliminate even the possibility that — let alone any explanation of how — the effect could have taken place. There is a world of difference between a spectator's not knowing how something's done versus his knowing that it can't be done.

The performance of magic today attempts to accomplish much: entertainment; the creation of beauty; the audience's personal engagement and involvement; the creation of a memorable, unique persona or character; the display of skill, of artistry. All of these are laudable goals. They are certainly necessary if the art of magic is to survive in a competitive, demanding, fast-paced world. But they should not overpower or distract from the illusion of impossibility.

The art of magic is limitless. Our creations can be as clever as our intellect, as subtle as our imagination, and as devilish as our will to deceive. The feeling of impossibility is a fragile, ephemeral goal; when achieved, it is transitory, lasting only for an instant. But that sense of impossibility will long be remembered as a uniquely magical moment. It is an ideal for us to strive for in the

creation of magical effects. To paraphrase the philosophers, “the impossible is as wonderful as it is rare.”

Simon Aronson
The Aronson Approach
1990

SIMON ARONSON

Simon Aronson is a renaissance man in magic. An esteemed student of Ed Marlo, Aronson built a name for himself for his intricate inventions and concepts with a pack of cards, particularly the memorized deck. Aronson is also a philosopher of magic, as well as a mentalist.



When Paul Harris resurfaced in 1995 to release a trilogy of his life's work up to that point, he was a changed man. Gone was the smiling, carefree, flirtatious persona, and with it went the intricate, fantasy patter and one-liners that helped gain him international renown. Instead, Paul emerged with a new worldview of magic: the theory of astonishment. It has ushered in a new generation of magicians less concerned with fanciful presentations and comedy shtick, and more concerned with the magical experience in the minds of the audience. Rarely does a piece of writing change the course of magic, but that is just what the next few pages have done.

ASTONISHMENT IS OUR NATURAL STATE OF MIND

BY PAUL HARRIS

"IF YOU TAKE ANY ACTIVITY, ANY ART, ANY
DISCIPLINE, ANY SKILL, TAKE IT AND PUSH
IT AS FAR AS IT HAS EVER BEEN PUSHED
BEFORE, PUSH IT INTO THE WILDEST EDGE OF
EDGES, THEN YOU FORCE IT INTO THE REALM
OF REAL MAGIC."

-TOM ROBBINS

WHAT?

The magic arena is a place of infinite possibilities and there's room to play whatever game you want. But just for a moment let's play the game of pushing the art into the wildest edge of edges.

All right. Here we go. Think back to your first magical encounter. The seed experience that first excited you then compelled you to

do magic yourself. Someone did a trick for you that made you gasp. For me it was when my uncle Paul smashed a newspaper-covered glass through a table top. A moment of ecstatic bliss where every thought was pulled from my face leaving nothing more than empty space.

My first instinct was not to hear a joke or be entertained or to be told a story or to make small talk but to experience that moment again and again. And it's natural to think if you could learn to do magic yourself, then...well, you could have this experience all the time. But then about three seconds later you realize that it's fun to know secrets and to do things for people that they can't figure out. And suddenly you're out of the astonishment game and into the ego game and with hard work and some good jokes and maybe even into the money game.

So now you're a long way from home and from that first virgin gasp that motivated the journey. And now you're performing some of your high-entertainment-value effects and despite yourself a profound moment of astonishment is unleashed. It doesn't happen every time but when the moon is right and the conditions are just so...there it is, a moment of total white-light astonishment. And you look at those astonished faces and maybe you're not sure what to say, or you feel a little guilty, or a bit uncomfortable because it's stopped the flow of your show or changed your easy relationship with the audience. Something powerful has happened. But everyone knows it's just a trick and you're "just a magician" so there's this dysfunctional relationship going on and no one's sure what to do with this strange experience including yourself.

But in general you're pretty happy because on some level you recognize this as a big win until someone says, "I wish the children were here to see this." And for a moment you feel your whole game fall apart. Doing magic for children can be

glorious. But the frequently voiced opinion that the experience of astonishment is a childish thing makes you wonder about what's really going on.

If you listen carefully you'll also hear things like "that made me feel like a child again" or "you made me feel like a little kid at the circus." And if you think about this, you'll see that what these astonished adults are really trying to say, even though they're not consciously aware of it, is that for a brief moment, *they experienced a clear, primal state of mind that they associate with a child's state of mind.* Somehow the adult experience of astonishment triggered some feeling of what it felt like to be a child.

I'm going to say this again because it's so much fun using the italics button: *The experience of astonishment is the experience of a clear, primal state of mind that they associate with a child's state of mind.* It's the same experience that seduced you into performing magic in the first place. And if you follow these footprints it takes you right up to the crumbling edge of everything we think we are...and just beyond to a state of mind we experienced naturally as small children but that society devalued then made taboo as we became adults.

Here's basically how it works, give or take a few metaphors.

You come into the world a blank slate. No ideas about who you are or what anything is. You're just being. And it all feels great... because there are no options, or opinions or judgments. There is no right or wrong. Everything is everything. That's what you see in a baby's eyes. Pure child's mind. Then, very quickly, we learn stuff. The names of ten thousand things, who we are, what we're supposed to be, what's good and bad according to the current rules of the game. And you organize all of this information into little boxes. And when any new information comes along you file it in the appropriate box.

Right now you might be filing these very thoughts into your whack-o ideas box. I understand. You're just doing your job. You've been trained to do this since birth. You have thus created your world-view.

There's no particular reality to any of this. But it's in your head and you know the territory and it's where all of your thoughts do their thinking. But we quickly forget what was there in the first place because these thousands of little thought-boxes are stacked up so tight that the original clear space of child's mind is completely covered up. It's not gone. It's just blocked by this wall of over-stuffed boxes.

And then along comes a focused piece of strange in the form of a magical effect. Let's say this book vanishes from your hands. "Poof," no book. Your trained mind races into action and tries to put the piece of strange into one of its rational boxes. But no box will hold it. At that moment of trying to box the unboxable your world-view breaks up. The boxes are gone. And what's left? Simply what was always there. Your natural state of mind. That's the moment of astonishment. The sudden experience of going from boxes to no boxes. If you can keep the fear-response from arising you have the experience of going from a cluttered adult mind to the original clear space. Gee, it almost makes you feel like a kid again.

For most people the moment lasts under ten seconds. Then because we crave the security of our missing world-view, we quickly build a new box. The "it-went-up-his-sleeve" box or the "it-was-all-done-with-mirrors box" or even the "I-don't-know-what-happened-but-I-know-it-was-a-trick" box. And that's all it takes. One thought, one guess, even a wrong one, and the boxes all come back, natural mind gets covered up, and the moment of astonishment is over.

Astonishment is not an emotion that's created. It's an existing state that's revealed.

SO WHAT'S THE POINT?

This new model redefines the magician's valuable role in our culture as an "astonishment guide" who can help others experience their natural state of mind. This is a galactic leap from the magician's current role as novelty entertainer, or super con-man or Mr. Ego. The center of magic has always been the therapeutic experience of our natural state of mind. But that primal experience is so powerful and the taboo of "losing" our adult mind is so great that we water down the experience with jokes and excuses and "hey, it's just a trick."

When the experience of astonishment starts to be recognized as a highly-valued destination, the win/lose magician vs. spectator game starts to dissolve. Suddenly you're both on the same team...equally responsible for getting the most out of the moment.

More experienced astonishees who've learned to surrender to the moment and sink into the astonishment will be rewarded with a deeper, more sustained experience. Others who feel compelled to fight the moment or treat it as a puzzle to be figured out will get what they pay for...non-astonishment.

There is a genuine difference in the quality of people's experience of magic once they understand the new model and take responsibility for the moment. I've had the participants who "get-it" trying to explain it to those who don't. One astonishee said it was like the difference between tossing down a beer and savoring a fine wine. Someone else referred to it as "gourmet astonishment."

This model reshapes the perceptions of people who feel “I was astonished but I know it was all just a trick, so what I experienced couldn’t have been real or very valuable.” Because now it’s understood that the astonishment and the tricks are not the same thing. The astonishment is real. It’s a brief flash of our natural state of mind. A place we should all experience more often.

The tricks are simply tools to help unleash the moment.

You and your astonishee can still have fun and tell jokes and play together, but now there’s an understandable therapeutic value to the game. A definite win for all players.

In a nutshell. You’re using magical illusions to dissolve cultural illusions in order to experience a moment of something real. The art of astonishment, when pushed into the wildest edge of edges, is the art of doing real magic.

So now it’s up to you. This is not something that can be mass-produced and stuffed into a vinyl packet-trick wallet. This will take everything you’ve learned about how people’s perceptions and illusions interact and then some. You may even want to stop performing for awhile to break free of old patterns.

Until then, even if magic is just your way to relax and have fun (which is a profoundly worthwhile goal in itself), there are still a few things you can do to help create this new game. If the situation is right, let your audiences know that the moment of astonishment is a quick flash of their natural state of mind. Tricks are tools. Astonishment is real. You’re just helping them to unleash the moment. Some people will instantly relate to this, others will make funny faces. But if this one idea gets out and takes hold, it could dramatically transform people’s perceptions of magic and magicians...quickenning the evolution of the art.

A bigger challenge is to train yourself not to step on the moment. I'm still working on it myself. When you hit that rare white-light moment of pure astonishment, don't tell a joke or apologize or hurry on to the next trick. Resist the urge to run away from the fire you've worked so hard to build. Relax and enjoy the heat and let your astonishees have a complete experience.

Surfing in the center of the big gasp is at the heart of magic.

PAUL HARRIS

Paul Harris has created some of the most revolutionary close-up plots in the last half-century. He has also consulted for stage and screen, and was a part of the team that conceived of David Blaine's game-changing television career.



Gasp-surfing isn't always possible because theatrical or commercial considerations will take center stage. Although even here you can splash around in the moment an extra beat or two to let it resonate.

But if you're in a relaxed setting and you've already helped your participants understand the new game, then you can start exploring the edges. These experimental performances are your laboratory. So whenever possible check the results by interviewing your subjects to find out their real experience and perceptions...so you can learn how to better extend or deepen or enhance their astonishment experience next time.

Much of this is unexplored territory for me too. I'm currently straddling my past and current approaches to magic and can feel my pants starting to rip. These conflicting visions are what make up the contents of these books. So now what? So now we pull back from the edge to the security of our current close-up culture, take a break for some milk and cookies, then begin our search for some unboxable pieces of strange.

Paul Harris

The Art of Astonishment

1996

JOHN CARNEY

John Carney is considered one of the finest living exponents of sleight-of-hand. A student of Dai Vernon, Carney has won numerous top awards in the industry, and has performed choice spots on major television networks. To counterbalance his straightforward performing persona, Carney created an alias, Mr. Mysto, a hapless mentalist who bungles everything he does yet still manages to amaze.



The previous essays by Messrs. Reynolds, Aronson, and Harris are lofty and abstract. The next passage is at turns inspirational and instructive, but at all times applicable. John Carney, one of the greatest living exponents of magic, reminds us of the timeless lesson that there are no shortcuts to mastery.

APPROACHES AND ARTIFICE

BY JOHN CARNEY

I have had the rare pleasure of spending time with Dai Vernon—certainly one of our century’s finest magical minds. During the course at our association I have seen him approached by hundreds of aspiring conjurers, eager for his counsel and advice. The vast majority never had specific questions, yet expected to receive some great secret.

“Always use hand cream to palm more efficiently,” they might imagine him saying. “Remember to use only red-backed playing cards.” “Here is the move that’s going to put you over the top!” They might have walked away a little disappointed, not understanding that there is not one great secret, but a great many little ones. “The Professor” holds Leonardo da Vinci in the greatest veneration. He is fond of a quote attributed to Leonardo: “Details make for perfection, but perfection is no detail,” As I understand it, his meaning was that seemingly insignificant details contribute to a greater whole. It is the combination and arrangement of these details that separate the conjurer from the bumbling amateur. Leonardo also warns us not to let technique overshadow content. The emphasis should be placed on the message or idea, and its conveyance.

Zen philosophers believe that the beginning of all knowledge is to admit that you know nothing. A popular story tells of a man seeking enlightenment, who visits the home of a Zen master. In his hospitality the master offers him a full cup of tea. Without having taken a sip, the master began to refill the student's cup with more tea which, exceeding the capacity of the cup, spilled out and onto the floor. The master then said, "Before you can receive more, you must empty your cup." The student went away, humbler and closer to enlightenment.

Art cannot be taught: it must be studied, put into practice, and experienced. To become a great writer, you must write. To master the violin or paint with depth and feeling, you must throw yourself into it, and do it extensively. In magic, the more shows you do, formal or informal, the more confidence is developed — and confidence is essential; and if mistakes are corrected after each performance, your ability will naturally improve.

Desire and perseverance are fundamental ingredients in your training. I often hear people say, "I don't learn well from books. Won't you just show me," or "Can you recommend a good video?" In our fast-paced video-microwave culture, we want it, and we want it now! The vacuous results are disposable music, fast-food art, and paint-by-number magic.

Communications professor Neil Postman argues in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, that what we gain from video instruction is essentially only convenience and entertainment. What is lost is the more complete comprehension provided by contemplation of the printed word. The discoveries in the course of the lesson are as important as the lesson itself. As the Chinese say, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for life." Videos may assist in learning, but by no means should they be your primary resource. They provide only a model for imitation,

and require little interpretation or imagination from the student. The consequence of this lack of discipline is a merely superficial insight, and a decreased capacity for improvement and adaptation to individual style. Imitations are reproductions that are always paler than the original.

Truly, some things are better left to the imagination, which is capable of applications and combinations in infinite variety. This information is then processed by personality and need, resulting in creative thought.

I have found that there are basically two modes of practice, involving different sides of the brain. First comes analytic practice. In this, the information is studied, and physical adjustments are made. What if the cards are held tighter or looser, higher or lower? What are the finger positions? Why doesn't it work every time? What's the variable? How do I cover the action, misdirect attention, or present it in a dramatic manner?

Next comes mechanical practice, which is basically repetition and the acquisition of "motor memory": the same actions are repeated until they are unconscious responses to conscious demands. The mind wills, and the hands perform without thought, much like breathing, walking, or brushing our teeth.

There must be a constant fluctuation between these two modes of practice: Adjustments are made, based on reason; then the nervous system is conditioned to respond without awkward pause. Only after going through this process are we ready to present a new item to an audience. New lessons are learned from this public trial, and the process is repeated. With ruthless honesty and adaptability, we progress from one plateau to the next.

BEYOND CRAFT

One might well ask, “Is magic really an art at all?” This is open to argument. However, I do feel there is art in magic. By this I mean that there is evidence of it in the work of exceptional magicians. There are magicians who have made it their duty to be artists, with all the responsibilities that commitment entails.

First, how do we go about defining art? An excellent source regarding art and its relationship to magic is Maskelyne and Devant’s classic book, *Our Magic*. Here we learn that art is the imitation of something that exists, or might exist. It is thoughtful work that communicates ideas and inspires imagination.

Maskelyne has divided art into three categories. There is False Art, work that imitates other art, such as a sketch of the original Mona Lisa. Imitation without interpretation.

There is Natural Art, which uses familiar means to attain special results. These can include an original combination of methods, an original or novel effect, or original presentation. This might be a simple painting of a bowl of fruit, but could also communicate environment, mood, time of day, and countless other provocative details. The majority of art falls into this category.

Finally, there is the illusive High Art. This is inspired work that has no precedent. The concept and method are completely original. This would constitute an exceptional achievement. Even works of the masters, in all arts, are influenced to some extent by other artists, and by common experience and information. There is rarely anything that is completely new “under the sun.”

Craft, on the other hand, is the learning of a trade to produce a consistent product. This product is then duplicated without further change at development, for the purpose of selling for a

profit. Art, on the other hand, exists for its own sake. This is not to imply, of course, that art cannot achieve popular success.

So how should one go about elevating the craft of magic to the level of art? What sort of changes need to be made? What are the elements that distinguish art from craft?

In considering the foregoing, we understand that art must communicate something of potential interest. People are mainly interested in, first, themselves, second, other people; and third, things — in that order. Tricks communicate little and are inherently meaningless, but with imagination they may be installed with meaning.

The average card trick is pointless and ultimately unsatisfying. To discover the identity of a chosen card is, to say the least, not a particularly profound mystery. Life contains a plethora of worthier ponderables.

Exceptional in this regard is Bro. John Hamman's famous "Twins" trick. Instead of changing the cards in a packet from, say, jokers to aces, he uses kings and queens. The cards assume personalities as he refers to as "twin brothers", "twin sisters," and "redheaded ladies."

As the audience is astounded by the startling changes effected with the cards, they are captivated by the comic drama and the affairs of the characters. This is something they can relate to better than puzzles and pasteboard.

One of my favorite magicians in the world is Dr. Hiroshi Sawa. His plots are novel and his methods ingenious. His beautiful tricks are inspired by nature and his daily life. Where others use a plastic paddle to make spots disappear. Sawa, adapting the same principle, uses the branch of a tree to make lady bugs

appear on its leaves. The result is poetry composed from a laundry list.

The average magician makes coins appear and disappear without provocation. Sawa describes an experience in Las Vegas, substituting his hand for a slot machine. When he loses, the deposited coins are shown gone, when he wins, a large quantity of coins appears from nowhere.

The audience is amazed, but more importantly, they are drawn in to experience, vicariously, the exhilaration of risk, and a jackpot reward. Through this involvement they develop an empathy for the performer. Emotion has entered the equation.

Sometimes all that is needed is to look at something from a different angle. Robert-Houdin illustrated this in his famous experience with the superstitious natives of Algeria. By his ingenuity, a trick of marginal interest, was fashioned into an inspired illusion. The principle of electro-magnetism, then relatively unknown, was the method by which a small metal box could not be lifted from the floor. But Robert-Houdin was not satisfied with the obvious and pedestrian presentation of a box that could not be lifted, How much greater was the effect on the Algerian public when he claimed he could take away a man's strength! He would be unable to lift the box unless, of course, Robert-Houdin chose to "restore his strength" through an interruption in the secret electromagnetic current.

Robert-Houdin knew that the effect was what he chose it to be. He understood theater and how to exploit his knowledge of human nature – their wants, needs and interests.

Those wishing to rise above the level of craft would do well to study the examples these men have set. However, inspiration is not always found in the most obvious places. Seek it out

in all art forms. Find out how creative artists and musicians, working with the same theme, can produce entirely different interpretations.

JAMY IAN SWISS

Jamy Ian Swiss is an erudite cage-rattler. His writings are often in shocking contrast to accepted norms. His unwavering quest for ideals, truth, and perfection in magic is rivaled only by his passion for expressing those opinions. After years of performing in the trenches of the real world, we got a taste of Jamy's self-expression, with several phenomenal television segments on "The Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson."—in which we saw Jamy's theories in practice.



So far you have heard the silent voices of several magicians calling out to you, each one with a different answer to the question, "What is magic?" To conclude this chapter, Jamy Ian Swiss gives his input, and then asks this all-important question...to you.

THE SEARCH FOR MYSTERY

BY JAMY IAN SWISS

"GIVE ME A MYSTERY—JUST A PLAIN AND SIMPLE ONE—A
MYSTERY WHICH IS DIFFIDENCE AND SILENCE, A SLIM
LITTLE, BAREFOOT MYSTERY: GIVE ME A MYSTERY —
JUST ONE!"
MYSTERIES,
YEVGENY YEVTUSHENKO

When you do magic — what are you doing?

After a student has been studying with me for a time, and has gone through some of the preliminary rounds of fundamental techniques, the first trick, scriptwriting, performance notes, and rewrites—just about the time he or she begins to gain some command of the elements and develop a sense that perhaps this will somehow amount to something after all, we begin to move on to more ambitious theoretical subjects. We usually broach the

topic of character by way of the exercises I have described in “The Elements of Style.”

But then there is a point that eventually comes along, at different times for different students. And that is when I pose the questions:

When you do magic—what are you doing?

What does the word magic mean to you?

This usually stops them dead in their tracks. Perhaps there is an initial glib response: “To do the impossible.” “To create an illusion.” Uh-huh. But what does that mean? And why are you doing it? And why, for that matter, should anyone be interested? Things tend to slow down considerably at this point. What seems like an easy question—if a magician knows anything, he knows the meaning of the word magic, doesn’t he? —turns out to be the toughest question yet encountered.

Because, after all, there is no absolute definition, is there? You have the freedom to define it yourself. But you also now have the responsibility to fulfill that demand. As with the definitions of any art, they can represent an opportunity or a burden—or most likely both.

So what does magic mean? What is it about?

As noted elsewhere, we begin already at a disadvantage by being stuck with a host of negative associations. Does magic mean behemoth boxes in which we inflict unconvincing tortures on uninteresting paid victims? Balloon twisters at the kiddies’ birthday party? Transparently superficial publicity stunts masquerading as substance? Bra tricks and sponge ding-dongs? To some, this, sadly, is “magic.” To many others it is

magic aversion therapy. In the face of such obstacles, we are left to define magic for ourselves. We must define it, lest we allow others to do it for us.

Magic seems to have something to do with creating illusions, the convincing illusion of the achievement of the impossible. Magic may speak overtly or at the very least implicitly to the methods and mechanisms behind these illusions, for human beings are thinking animals, animals with big brains, the kind of animals who want and need to know how things work. Magicians ignore this deep need at their peril.

We might suggest that the methodology of magic has to do with specially honed skills — such as sleight of hand. Or special knowledge—as of mechanical or psychological principles. We might acknowledge or even openly address the element of deception. So far, all these claims are true, to varying degrees. We might claim supernormal powers — in which case we are now lying about the fact of our lying, forsaking the honorable tradition of “honest lying” that is the magician’s unique forte. We may simply insist there is no explanation at all—still, there remains the question of where does responsibility for the impossible achievement lie? Is it in the magician’s hands? A function of birthright and biology? Is it beyond his control, the work of nature—or the work of imaginary gods? Questions, questions—no matter how you try to duck them, there will always be another.

Until, that is, you plant your feet somewhere and commit to the solid ground of an idea—of an intellectual or an artistic or even a moral idea—about what you are doing.

An idea not merely of the how, but of the why.

We know there are goals we wish to achieve for ourselves, be it fame and fortune, or merely rent money, recognition, and little respect. Or perhaps there is an artistic vision by which we hope to express ourselves to the world at large. But what is the experience we are trying to bring to our audiences?

So much for us. What about them?

Perhaps we wish to return our audiences to a sensation of childlike wonder. That trite, dreary, and indeed extraordinary claim is repeatedly echoed throughout the world of conjuring, though it never seems to contain any meaning or commitment. What do we mean by this sense of wonder? Do we mean that an audience of, say, mechanical engineers will literally stand in wide-eyed awe of a man who knows how to use a thumbtip and has a tiny red rag to stuff into it?

Or will they marvel at the spectacle of a ten-foot pole drawn from a paper bag? That must be it.

“I can change a red hanky into a green hanky. You may now worship me.”

I think most of this talk about childlike wonder is nonsense. Find the child within you and slap it.

To me, the world is full of mystery and wonder – not in the sense that a child experiences wonder, but in the way a fully formed adult, free of fear and superstition, experiences it. I like presenting my art to thinking adults who are mentally, morally, and aesthetically engaged in the world. I hope they will bring every skill and sense to bear on my work, and I hope to engage them with it on every channel.

When a scientist who spends his life trying to understand the universe and how it works speaks of wonder, he does not speak of that which he cannot or will not understand. He speaks of that which he hopes to understand fully—which, far from diminishing his appreciation, actually expands it. For the more he understands its workings, the better he can recognize its beauty.

Those who hate life and freedom and human responsibility, and live in fear of their own inadequacies as well as those of their fellows, often fail to see the beauty that lies in insight and comprehension. To understand is not to make ugly—it is to reveal beauty. This is mature wonder—not the phony wonder of hiding from truths and masking the inner workings of the world.

I believe that one of the reasons scientists and other intelligent audiences so delight in smart and stylish conjuring (as has consistently been my professional experience) is because they view magic as a burlesque of their own work. People who have confidence in their own deep understanding of the natural universe enjoy the opportunity to visit an imaginary version of it, where the clearly impossible becomes seemingly possible. It is an experiential vacation of a sort. These are people who have the assurance to know that they could easily determine the fundamental secrets of magic if they were inclined to take a trip to the library. The “secrets,” such as they are, are so trivial and accessible that it’s not even necessary to know them. To know they exist is enough.

It is, instead, the person who, intimidated by his own lack of understanding, must prove his intellectual worth on the terra firma of our little card trick. We have all had the bizarre experience of the misplaced aggression—what I call “inappropriate rationality” -- of the one character who challenges at every turn

and is fundamentally unable to engage in an enjoyable experience of witnessing the impossible. I often find myself wondering if this same person has committed half as much energy to, say, investigating the validity of his medical care. Imagine if they worked as hard on something that really mattered.

This is perhaps one of the curious side effects of magic that can serve as an interesting diversion for its practitioners; namely that the experience tends to render many people psychologically transparent. But what is most unusual about this phenomenon is that they are generally unaware it is occurring. If people cry at a movie or laugh at a joke, they recognize on some level they are revealing themselves. But if they delight in a magic trick—or are aggravated by the frustration of it to the point of confrontation—they tend not to realize what they are exposing in themselves.

As Penn & Teller have pointed out, it is invariably those who claim to love the mystery most who in fact cannot stand to face it. These are the folks who will invent any explanation, no matter how slender the supporting evidence, rather than face the fact that the mystery remains. Scientists meanwhile do not demolish mystery—they embrace it.

I am disinterested in wonder that stems from the experience of not knowing. For me, wonder stems from awareness and knowledge and insight. That is a genuine, adult sense of wonder. For a magician, no matter how one defines the experience of magic, one uses magic as a tool: an instrument, a voice, a channel, a means of communication. If there is nothing to communicate beyond its most menial definition—"I can fool you"—it quickly grows tiresome. Who, after all, craves such an experience? It would require a severe streak of masochism.

Similarly, if the magician has failed to define for himself what magic means to him, then he has by definition now trivialized

his medium, and the audience will implicitly recognize this. After a few moments of light amusement, the experience is overlooked and promptly forgotten.

I firmly believe that, first and foremost, what an audience craves from any performer is a point of view. It is only when an artist communicates his own point of view that an audience can begin to decide on their own. That so many magicians neglect to make such clear decisions for themselves is what renders magic such a frivolous experience of negligible import or meaning. The equation is simple: The audience typically cannot draw from the experience any more than you have put into it.

The audience will generally not do the work for you either. (Unless, that is, you can induce them to project the illusion of substance onto your tabula rasa, as has been known to happen—but it doesn't seem a terribly satisfying goal, does it?) It quickly becomes clear if you have brought a substantial entree to the table or merely a puff pastry. The audience will respond to you in kind. Present them with something into which they can sink their mental and emotional teeth, and some will energetically savor the meal. They reap what you sow.

If you expend the necessary thought and effort on developing a point of view and finding ways to invest it in your performance, there is no guarantee the audience will agree. But they at least have a starting point to decide something, anything, about what they now think and feel. And together, perhaps, you can build a meaningful relationship with these provisions.

What do I mean by point of view? You needn't state it overtly—in fact, the essence of good art is to show, not tell. (This idea is not limited to the performing arts, or to the visual arts. It is, in fact, fundamental in good writing.) But you must somehow reveal your thoughts and feelings about what you are doing. If you fail

in this, the words you utter merely become what I call “noise from the mouth,” and the lack of commitment and meaning you invest in them is instantly recognizable. And again, the audience will respond intuitively and appropriately—by not listening.

So: WHAT DOES MAGIC MEAN TO YOU?

Before you go away to ponder that question, I’ll leave you with what magic means to me.

To me, now, as I write these words after forty years of asking myself this very question: Magic is the experience of mystery. Magic is not only this. As a means of communication, it can be used to invoke both ideas about and feelings of conflict and struggle, irony and absurdity, fear and anger, heroism and humanity, outrage and contempt, admiration and inspiration—the palette of human emotion, the entire panoply of the human condition. From love to hate and every nuance in between. If Shakespeare covered it, so can magic.

Magic, for me, has to do with skill, with the human capacity to commit to mastering challenges, and the recognition that accomplishment in others can be satisfying to us all and indeed inspiring to some, because we are so much more like one another than we are different. This is the appeal of sports, of heroism, of any doing or doer of great deeds. Handled deftly, there can be something of this in magic.

Magic, for me, has a great deal to do with deception; with how we are deceived in our lives, by others and by ourselves. As a magician, this is my specialty, is it not? As my friend James Randi has said, we know how to deceive people, and how to recognize when they are being deceived. I might use this knowledge simply to keep on deceiving them—but I might expand beyond

that perilously narrow strip of territory, and bring insight and understanding to my audience. Such can be the power of art. But after a lifetime in this art, I have come to believe that, while magic can and should embrace all these experiences, the one experience magic is most ideally suited for, and which it can convey in a manner that actually sets it apart from all the other arts, is the experience of mystery.

Magic tells us that life is filled with mysteries, both grand and trivial. There is little doubt that we cannot face every mystery in the same fashion. There will always be some mysteries we wish to solve, and some we don't; some we are driven to solve, and do. I believe that how we face these mysteries says a great deal about us as individuals, and how we make our way in the world.

And this is magic's special place; this is where it lives and breathes. By invoking the experience of mystery, we have the chance to bring our audience face to face with both their wishes and their fears—and to pose the question of which is which. When a person says, "How do you do it?" No, I don't want to know, they have expressed both in an instant. Do they want that knowledge—are they afraid of that knowledge—or do they believe it is a kind of knowledge better not known?

You may pretend these issues are lightweight, in which case you will succeed in producing a lightweight experience. But clearly they are at risk of being more vital if you can stand to face that risk yourself. I try to communicate to my audience my own sense of priorities about mystery—and I hope to inform theirs—but first and foremost I hope to give them that experience, and with no holds barred. When you put the truly impossible in front of someone, and you place them firmly and uncompromisingly into that experience—not the puzzling or the briefly distracting,

but the deeply impossible, the impenetrably mysterious—people react. Things happen. And it can be very interesting to be a part of it when they do.

Some in my audience may wish to believe that my mysteries are due to a supernatural agency. I find this distasteful in the extreme, and I try to communicate that. Some in my audience aren't sure and want to know more, so I try to tell them. Some in my audience know clearly what is real and what is not, and delight in experiencing that difference—and I try to give them a place to savor that experience and enjoy themselves.

For myself, I like seeing that look in someone's eye when he has run smack into the experience of mystery, and there is no escape, no longer any way out but to face the fact that mystery is now right in front him, as well as all around him.

I am less interested than ever today in being a light amusement or a pleasant distraction. Leave that to others. I have within my reach—not readily or easily, but with great effort, at least potentially—the power to create a unique experience. And as Eugene Burger wrote so many years ago, “If I do not take this seriously, how can I expect my audience to do so?” As Derren Brown has said: “Magic done not solemnly, no—but seriously.” My audience has infinite chances in their daily lives to be amused and puzzled and distracted. They have a television, they have an online connection. I am out for bigger game, and I am committed. I shall not be dissuaded.

I shall not merely amuse.

I shall not merely distract.

I shall bring upon them the experience of mystery, and with this commonality between us now, we will go forward and explore our humanity.

Come with us.

Jamy Ian Swiss
Shattering Illusions
2002

PART TWO



THINKING LIKE OUR AUDIENCES

"IN THE PERFORMANCE OF GOOD MAGIC
THE MIND IS LED ON, STEP BY STEP, TO
INGENIOUSLY DEFEAT ITS OWN LOGIC."

-DAI VERNON

In the first section we explored how to think like a magician. Now we enter the headspace of our spectators. We begin with a more basic overview of the territory by Dariel Fitzkee, and then we jump into more complex terrain (courtesy of Derren Brown) on specific techniques to help us think like our audiences.

PROCESSES WITHIN THE SPECTATOR'S MIND

BY DARIEL FITZKEE

The intended dupe of the magician's wiles is, of course, the spectator. He is the objective. All of the performer's endeavor is aimed at deceiving him. He is the obstacle the magician encounters. In him are combined the formidable barriers the deceiver must breach and the very weaknesses that make him vulnerable.

It is the magician's task to learn how to avoid the barriers and to attack the weak spots.

It might be interesting to look at things from his viewpoint, for the moment. What the spectator sees and what the average magician thinks this spectator sees might be considerably surprising, even revealing.

Deception is actually magic in reverse. What the spectators see is magic—presuming that the performer's efforts have been successful. The identical performance, from the magician's viewpoint, is deception. The spectator sees things that appear to be impossible. The magician sees happenings that are not at all mysterious. When the performer does The Egg Bag Trick, the spectator believes he sees an egg taken from an empty bag. The

magician, from his viewpoint, merely takes an egg from a secret compartment in the bag.

So, in order that the operation may become deception, it is mandatory that the magician realizes at all times what the spectator sees—and understands.

The source of the spectator's experience, magical or otherwise, is his perceptions. Everything he undergoes is perceived, in some manner, through his senses. The sum total of his conscious life comes to him through the five senses, but more particularly through the senses of seeing and hearing.

The spectator's senses can convey to him only what is seen, heard, felt, tasted, or smelled. The egg and the egg bag are seen. What he sees the performer do with them comes through his eyes. What the performer says about them comes to the spectator through his ears.

But the mind, not the eye, sees. The mind, not the ear, hears. The mind, not the fingers, feels. So it is with all of the senses. Ultimately the sense impression is a function of the mind. Through these senses, the mind is this spectator's means of direct acquaintance with that which is external to him.

But his perceptive sense includes both awareness and consciousness.

He is aware of something that is outside of himself. He is aware of this through his own *vigilance in observation*. Or it may come through *information*. Awareness is the result of drawing inferences. It is a deriving by reasoning or implication, a concluding from facts or premises, or a finding as a consequence, conclusion or probability. These come from what he sees, hears,

feels and acquires from the other senses. But the mind, too, is involved in the process deeply.

So, when the magician shows this spectator the egg, the latter's awareness carries him much further than the mere act of seeing. He recognizes it as an egg because he is familiar with eggs through past experience. He knows eggs to be definitely material objects with certain definite identifying characteristics. He knows the egg would be broken if it were to be struck against the hand as the magician strikes the bag into which it is placed. He knows the egg would fall from the bag, when the bag is inverted, if the egg were inside. He also knows anything heavy which might be inside of a cloth bag, would fall out, if the bag were inverted. Well, here we are already, going into the force of gravity. Before we could finish, ultimately we might possibly explore a considerable portion of his education and personal experience.

There is another factor present while the spectator is perceiving. This is consciousness. Even while this spectator is aware of what he is experiencing, he is also sensible to an inward state. This sensibility to an inward state or an outward fact is consciousness. It is a step beyond awareness. It applies particularly to that which is felt within this spectator. But since this spectator is conscious, as well, of what he sees, hears, feels and otherwise apprehends, these, too, enter his mind. This, his consciousness of a thing, may range from mere recognition to direct attention. It is that peculiar function of being aware of an inward state that particularly interests us here. This is because the spectator, influenced by past experience, does not necessarily believe all he sees. This is especially true at a magician's demonstration. The spectator comes to the performance prejudiced against what he is to see.

Thus, if the performer were to handle the egg in a manner unlike the way in which an egg is usually handled, the spectator would be conscious of a jarring note. The same might be said of the magician's remarks in connection with the egg. If he were to refer to it in some manner so as to suggest that, perhaps, the egg were not an ordinary egg, the spectator would be conscious of that incongruity.

It is curious to note just how strongly these remarks affect the spectator's mental processes. If the magician were to hold the egg up and say, "This is a most extraordinary egg," the spectators would take the opposite viewpoint. They would be certain the egg was quite ordinary. But if the performer were to say, "This is an ordinary egg," the spectators would immediately suspect it. It is almost a safe rule that the spectators invariably disbelieve what the magician says to them, if what he says seems to be important to him. That is one reason why direct statements are usually avoided by skillful magicians, when an important phase of the operation of the trick is involved.

The more skillful magicians will make direct statements only in connection with unimportant details or when their direct statements can be and are substantiated.

On the other hand, the skillful magician relies upon indirect methods where something vital is concerned. He handles, and refers to, the important thing as if it were of no consequence. He avails himself of the spectators' experience, habits, familiarity with things, to gain his point. He allows the spectator's consciousness to infer that the egg, or bag, is ordinary. He doesn't arouse the spectator's suspicions.

The deception the magician seeks to accomplish is an attack upon the spectator's mind. Specifically, it is an attack upon his understanding.

Since the spectator's understanding is what he learns through the senses, influenced by his reasoning, it is obvious that the magician must influence what the spectator's senses convey to the latter.

Of course, the magician must also influence the factors which contribute to the spectator's understanding.

The ideas in a spectator's mind arise from stimuli. A stimulus evokes or induces a response or a reaction. Without these stimuli, there is no conscious thought. The responses resulting from these stimuli are matters of the spectator's heredity, environment, training, experience, interests, disposition, knowledge, education and many other complex factors.

Merely placing unnecessary stress upon the egg or the bag stimulates the mind to activity.

Normally, the spectator's mind wanders around, picking up ideas and thoughts from varying stimuli. These stimuli may come from conscious or subconscious suggestion. Often this is a matter of habit. Frequently the course the mind may take is the result of an association of ideas, a chain of thought or a path plotted by successive stimuli. These are responses which in themselves become stimuli for still other responses.

Frequently it best suits the purpose of the magician not to disturb this normal chain thinking.

The spectator's understanding is no minor adversary. This understanding is the sum of the mental powers by which he has

acquired, retained and extended his knowledge. It is his power of apprehending relations. It is also his power of making inferences from these relations. What learning he has, naturally, comes from some source. His understanding includes what he knows from being told. It includes what he has received as implied or intended. It includes an ability to take or assume things as tacitly meant. His understanding knows through information he has received. It exercises power of comprehension.

When the magician does his trick with the egg and the little black bag, he has this magnificent mental reality to encounter. It cannot be lightly dismissed.

The information which this spectator's understanding acquires comes from what is seen, what is heard and what is derived through the other senses. It also includes what is implied or suggested. It comes from reading, observation and instruction. The acquirements of a lifetime are available to this spectator at the very moment the magician brings out the egg and the little black bag.

The faculty or power of understanding is intellect. Obviously, it is the spectator's power to understand that which is immediately presented to him in sense perception. The magician usually is aware of this. But the spectator's intellect also includes those things known by process of reasoning. It is an assemblage of faculties which is concerned with knowledge. This latter phase is often overlooked by magicians.

Included in the spectator's mind are all forms of conscious intelligence. This is activated intellect, the ability to exercise the higher mental functions. It is also a readiness of comprehension. To a varying degree, this spectator is a creature of thought. Don't overlook the important fact that the spectator has knowledge of things which may not even be obvious or apparent, for some

reason. This knowledge comes from information that has been given him, from what he observes, and from his inferences based upon his experience.

From the above foundation—an extremely simplified one, admittedly—we might undertake to construct our structure of deception.

The spectator sees the magician himself. He is aware of the performer's appearance, his dress, his features, and his posture. He is conscious of the type of person he seems to be, of his style of talking, of his apparent educational background. He even realizes something of the performer's disposition. Yet much of this information comes to the spectator subconsciously. The mind has a way of putting together clues from here and there, clues which definitely establish this performer as an individual. It is an automatic process, the specific details of which the spectator is totally unaware.

Suddenly ask this spectator what kind of person the performer is—his appearance, his mannerisms, his disposition and other characteristics. The spectator will answer readily enough. He will also reveal much more than the details the eyes have perceived. Mixed with what the eye brings to him will be opinions and conclusions possible only through mental activity, coupled with what he has observed.

Take the egg we have referred to, for example: It might be the proper size, the proper shape and the proper color. Yet this spectator may be conscious that it is not a real egg. His conclusion has been formed through subtle details which he, himself, might not be able to identify. The same might hold true of the bag. This spectator might have convictions that the bag is not as simple as it seems. These are not necessarily convictions based upon mere suspicions. They may be convictions created by intangible

details, which when brought together, subconsciously influence the spectator's opinion and conclusion.

This might be caused by the performer's manner of handling the egg or the bag. While he is viewing the performer, this spectator, of course, seeing the manner in which the magician conducts himself with the properties he uses.

Definitely a more revealing part of the presentation than the mere appearance of the magician and his properties is this manner of the performer.

The senses merely convey to the spectator what the magician looks like and his conduct. The performer may handle these properties confidently, naturally, and with assurance. Or his attitude might be unnatural, showing lack of confidence, and with too-great care in handling things about which the performer is plainly worried.

The tense picture also includes what the magician explains, as well as what he does not explain. It includes his auxiliary remarks, his posture, his gestures, his inflection and all other details to which the sense are attuned.

But in the background—weighing, classifying, accenting and comparing with past experience—is the judgment and understanding of this spectator. He detects an overtone. He is aware of a relaxation or a tension. He senses confidence, and its lack. He recognizes the natural and unnatural. He concludes what he believes to be true, to be dubious, and to be untrue.

And much the same holds true of the properties employed by the performer. They may seem ordinary or palpably special. They may appear to be simple, complex, or even suspicious and doubtful. What the magician does with them—and to

them—may be natural or unnatural. Many details go to form a conclusion.

These properties have shape, size, quality, color and meaning. They may be strange or familiar, ordinary or extraordinary, real or imitation, disguised or undisguised, even free or restricted. Coupled with the performer's conscious conduct are always the mannerisms which come subconsciously. These unconscious actions, remarks, inflections and the like are often more revealing than what the magician sets forth consciously.

Interlocked with the general appearance of the performer and his properties, part of the fabric of the mental concept shaped from the magician's behavior, manner and mannerisms, are the words the performer uses and their delivery. These, too, are an inseparable portion of that which the spectator takes in. Like a chemical change, these basic ingredients—appearance of the performer, appearance of the properties, what the performer does, his manner, what is said, how it is said—all of these basic ingredients combine to form an entirely new, an entirely separate entity. They cannot be separated without taking from this final, complete concept which is formed in the spectator's mind.

Nothing can be taken from all of the factors which go together to form the spectator's final mental image. This is because each part is necessary to complete and color the final result. To the spectator, the details are not separate. Various stimuli, in various ways provoke various responses. Without the exact combination of stimuli, in particulars, the specific concept received by the spectator cannot be the same.

Let me illustrate this: The performer shows the egg bag empty and apparently quite ordinary, in the usual manner. The egg is placed in the bag. Ultimately the bag is shown empty. Suppose, now, that, in placing the egg in the bag, the performer has

difficulty in finding the opening to the secret compartment. Realizing that the magician is fumbling with the bag, probably sensing a momentary feeling of panic on the part of the performer, the spectator's attention is centered on the bag. This stimulates an idea that perhaps the magician is seeking a hidden pocket. Perhaps an astute spectator, having received the clue he needs, actually can follow the performer's movements, even though cloaked in the bag. This spectator has imagination. He is shrewd. He is discerning. Having received the clue he needs, the spectator really sees the magician find the pocket and deposit the egg.

Now, if the performer is using a familiar routine, when this magician brings out his hand and makes the feint as if hiding the egg beneath his armpit, this astute spectator is not deceived at all. He recognizes it for the byplay it is.

Suppose, in contrast, the magician had not found it necessary to fumble. Suppose, instead, he had practiced this move so often and so thoroughly that it became one single, simple, unsuspecting movement. So the astute spectator does not receive the absolutely essential clue he needs. There is no stimulus to direct his thought to the secret pocket inspiration. When the magician's closed hand comes from the bag and makes the sweep toward the armpit, the spectator's attention follows right along, vigilantly. Now his attention is directed to the armpit, with confidence that he has caught the performer. His interest is centered upon the armpit with the same confidence, instead of upon the bag.

But this is only one change that has influenced the spectator's viewpoint. Throughout the presentation of every trick there are hundreds of factors that shape the course of the spectator's thinking. These may range from the obvious and significant to the most intangible and trivial. All of these details, even the

most minor, even the very order in which they occur, shape the spectator's ultimate concept.

The expert deceptionist, knowing this, takes advantage of the fact. He deliberately colors all details, both major and minor, to accomplish his purpose.

Dariel Fitzkee
Showmanship for Magicians
1943

DARIEL FITZKEE

Dariel Fitzkee (1898-1977) was a magical performer and author who authored three major works on magic, collectively known as the Fitzkee Trilogy. Comedian Steve Martin described Fitzkee's *Showmanship for Magicians* (from which this essay is excerpted) as "more important to me than *Catcher in the Rye*."



Author Michael Chabon wrote, "Every work of art is one half of a secret handshake." When we engage with an audience, they are the other half of the handshake. Questions arise in the minds of our spectators. We must learn to anticipate what these questions will be and how we can answer them through our material. Peter Samelson believes these questions to be three: What? Why? And Who?

WHY, WHAT, AND WHO? A THEORY OF QUESTIONS

BY PETER SAMELSON

There are three questions that form the basis of a performing philosophy. The three questions are really three words. These words can be applied to the entire range of performance in magic. And in their simplicity comes their strength. So let's meet these three little works. But before we do, I have a few thoughts.

Magic, we all seem to agree, has the potential to be an Art (with a capital A). And since this is true, there are several qualities inherent to magic which urges us in that direction.

The first is that it is a medium. It is a channel, a conduit. It is a means of communication through which humans share experiences, ideas, and visions. This communication is the ultimate goal, the enviable end of the road.

Second, there are techniques which have grown up within the artform. It is not merely a matter of desire which creates art and the artist. Skills must be sharpened and aptitudes developed. For a period of time, the acquisition of technique becomes an

end in itself, but as the artist matures, technique is relegated to its proper role... that of a means to an end.

Third, there are two major communities involved in this activity and product called Art. (In truth, there are many communities, including the community of dealers, the publishers, those who fund performances and innovation, those who make news out of it, etc. But here we are – for the sake of usefulness – restricting ourselves to two.) These communities are those of the practitioner and the spectator, which come together on those occasions called performances.

Fourth, as this Art communicates through imagery, there will be differences in the meaning of the art to the two communities. Due to the education of the community of practitioners, it will elicit a different psychological response, as it draws not only from the personal and cultural experiences of the each viewer, but is often tainted, if you will, with the practitioner's obsession of technique.

Fifth, maturity allows an artist the ability to control cultural symbolism which comes to replace purely personal symbolism. Sixth, there is a language that exists which allows our community to talk about the Art. This language allows the examination of both the product and the production. This discussion is part of that language.

All this brings me to the opportunity to introduce my friends. Much thinking needs to be applied to our performances, to the structure of individual pieces and to entire shows. In addition to allowing ourselves to be caught up in thinking about what we do, we need to learn how to do it better.

In his book *Spirit Theater* (1986), Eugene Burger pinpoints one of the dangers of performance as “wobbling.” A better description

I can't imagine. Eugene points the way toward effective performances, yet what we need are techniques to help us solve that problem he sets forth for us. That's why I want you to meet my friends.

So, let me introduce you: What. Why, Who, I'd like you to meet our reader. Dear reader. I'd like to have you meet my three friends, and tormentors. What. Why. and Who. Getting the introductions out of the way, I'll introduce you to these three inquisitors, but it is up to you to get to know them intimately.

You will find that each poses two questions, one from behind your eyes, the other from the other side of that great divide. So look at the issue from both sides now. (I've added a bit of commentary to show you how I interpret the questions, but it is only my point of view.)

WHY?

1. *Why am I doing this?*
2. *Why should anyone want to watch this?*

If there is a reason to do magic (fooling people is not a reason, just a technique) then what is it? What does someone have to gain from watching me perform?

WHAT?

1. *What is this piece about?*
2. *What would this look like if it were "real Magic?"*

Since magic is an imagistic art and communicates through its symbolism, each piece must have an inherent meaning. What is it? If it is to work as magic, it must look like magic. What would that be?

WHO?

1. *Who are you doing this for? Who is your audience?*
2. *Who are you in this presentation? Who is your character?*

The type of audience you perform for will determine the key part of the equation in exploring what your work means. Age, economic strata, environment: they all affect what you choose to do and where. Know yourself, know your work, know your audience. Who are they?

What do they want? And who is the character performing? Wouldn't that affect everything from costume to language?

Spend a little time with these friends of mine. Believe me, they love Magic. They will help you. Oh, you may not always be able to answer them, but just the asking of the questions is taking steps in the right direction.

Peter Samelson
Mystery School
2003

PETER SAMELSON

Peter Samelson's performances affect me deeply because, at virtually every moment he is onstage, his words and actions connect with the audience on a personal level. His material deals with subjects important to him: love, his childhood, and even comic books. His shows are a lesson in just how much humanity we can communicate to our audiences.



In retrospect, we can look back at the early writings of Derren Brown with expectant approval. After all, he is the UK's most famous and decorated mentalist, and an undisputed thought leader in our field.

But I'm old enough to remember actual events quite differently. Pure Effect came out in 2000, just before his television career catapulted him into the public's eye. The author of Pure Effect was a provocative unknown who espoused a decidedly different approach in both style and substance. He was just thirty years old when his writings were published.

His career is the rare inversion of the norm: he developed a crystal-clear theory on how he wanted his performances to look, and he achieved his goals through performance.

WORKING WITH THE SPECTATOR IN MIND

BY DERREN BROWN

If we are honest, what is our starting-point for forming an effect? I feel there is a tendency amongst many magicians to start with a new move, some clever sleight - from some point of methodological skill. Then the possibilities of that move are explored, until an effect is formed. Often that effect is marvelous, and one that will fool everyone. But to make it magical, the magician will have to change focus. And there, I feel, lies the rub.

The question for the performer in forming an effect should not be 'What can I do?' or 'How can I use this?' The ultimate questions that will lead to truly magical effects must be spectator-centric. 'What would really freak out a spectator?' 'What would convince them that I possessed this power?' 'What would move them in a particular way?' 'And what would they want to see?' Only after answering this, I think, one should ask - 'And what *then* can I provide to take it a step further?'

It is my opinion that this leads to a more creative process. The performer is placing himself in the position of the spectator. He is subjecting everything that he does or desires as a performer to the consideration of the effect that it would have on a spectator.

This consideration is paramount also in the performance -- not just the effects themselves. I remember recently visiting the restaurant where I regularly perform here in Bristol. I was sat in the spacious, Byzantine lounge area where attractive staff and a belly dancer pampered the guests. This was after maybe ten years of performing, but was the first time I *ever* got a *clear* sensation of exactly how I would feel if I were to be approached by a magician. It occurred to me that in those years of performing, I could *never* have really considered that. I realised how easily a chirpy, adequate magician would have made me cringe and been utterly out of place. I saw that I wanted to be pampered, not made to feel self-conscious. Had I really been ensuring that my little audiences had actually warmed to me and felt comfortable? I imagined a suave and theatrically-dressed chap coming over and introducing himself with a charming and discreet air - asking if he might join us for a few moments... I saw that it would be exactly right, exciting and elevating. But how easy it would have been to get that wrong!

I realised that through feeling insecure about approaching a table and compensating through brashness, I had probably alienated a lot of people in the past. How easy it is to be an embarrassing imbecile with this work!

Setting a Context

These thoughts led to me restructuring much of my close-up performance. Here I can only speak of how it affected my own style, which is appropriate to the venues where I perform. But I think the questions and considerations - but I make no presumptions about my answers - are worthwhile for anyone to take on board. Those that have will realize how rewarding such a reappraisal is.

The magician's first task is to set a context for his performance. I see the group as a *tabula rasa*. I approach them, I feel, with charm and confidence, and quickly achieve rapport. Yet I also retain an

authority that I want them to feel. I want to be seen to be withholding something. I want to hold a promise of something for them. I want to give them time to get ready for the magic. To become curious and attentive. To watch, essentially, on my terms. This is much more enjoyable than launching into a routine immediately. I can learn everyone's name, and make sure that they know mine. I am, after all, coming into their group uninvited. I have a basic responsibility to be at least civil. Again, I remember Eugene Burger at that convention. The magic can start long before you start an effect. I also remember that if I am walking into their space to perform, I am asking them to form judgements about me. Any magician that begins a table-hopping set with the selection of a card or the inspection of an object is deluding himself if he thinks the audiences are interested in the cards or prop for those moments. They are forming their opinions about the performer and assessing how they feel about him. I feel it is much better to realize that and give them a chance to like me and respect me before I start performing my magic for them.

For me, another result of making these changes was that I started to really and reliably enjoy table-hopping and walkaround magic. This may sound strange, but I trust that all of us that perform regularly will be familiar with the terrible ennui that can set in before approaching the first group of the evening, or starting again after a break. We're not in the mood. I found that by changing the way I interacted with the spectators and slowing down my performance to allow them to feel charmed and respected, I never again felt that grotesque reluctance to perform that comes when one has to force oneself into an 'upbeat' state unwillingly. There was no need to do that. My performance became more honestly me. An exaggerated version of me, certainly, but I no longer had to become something that I wasn't.

The next level where one must be aware of setting a context, I feel, is finding a meaning for the effect itself. Much has been said

on this by other authors and I do not have the years behind me nor the standing to speak with the same authority. Similarly I can add nothing very new to the discussion. But consider this if what you are presenting to the spectators is seen to be a *puzzle* to be solved, then they will be concerned with that task. And as with any puzzle offered, if they cannot arrive at the right answer themselves, then they will feel entitled to be told the solution. If the performer does not offer one, then they are entitled to feel resentful. I think of those ghastly lateral-thinking problems that a particular type of person enjoys offering for solution. Rather than simple murder, one engages in an attempt to find an answer depending on how polite one feels one should be. Imagine if one genuinely tried to work out the problem, until finally giving up, to find that the poser of the problem had no intention of confiding the answer. Heaven forefend that any of us should be such arsens in our performance, but the question of what meaning we are attaching to the effect is vital to performing strong magic that transcends the mundane.

If I may be so bold as to offer an example from my own repertoire, then I would direct the reader to my effect 'Transformation' towards the end of this book. This is, from a technical point of view, little more than some cards changing on the table, but it will have immense personal resonance for the spectator. Inasmuch as it is important to *relate* the effect to the life of your spectator for them to find some meaning inherent in it, there is little in the realm of magic and mentalism more relevant to a spectator than a personal reading, which forms the structure of the effect.

A TABULA RASA

I would suggest that the participant with whom you are about to begin your magic presents a clear, open and responsive slate for you to fill with emotional information. Most will have had no *experience* of live magic before, and even more will have had no

previous experience of *your* magic. The spectator/participant awaits cues from you to know how to behave. Presuming that you have picked your participant with a reasonable degree of wisdom, you can presume that she is eager to be helpful and not appear to be incompetent of performing the tasks at hand. This is why I believe before anything else regarding performing effects, that what you perform should be presented as essentially serious. NOT necessarily solemn, but essentially serious. When I think of an effect in this way, I imagine it to seem to have integrity, relevance, and elegance. Although it may be communicated with humour, it is clear that it is not trivial. The adult spectator realizes that magic is an adult art. Because your participant comes to you eager to learn how she should respond to your performance and instructions, you have the choice of whether she responds to them in a transient, lightly amused way, or whether she takes something rather personal and marvelous away with her.

Behind each effect I perform is the question of whether the presentation and communication of the effect are *worthy* of it. The effect has potential for unspeakably powerful impact. Where along that line am I performing it? Am I merely trivializing it? If we take, then, as our starting point that our participant is open to suggestion and emotional and psychological direction, we can now consider what emotions and states of mind are useful to elicit, and how to do so. Paul Harris has written marvelously about how magic takes us back to our infantile state of astonishment. That the experience of wonder triggers that early period when nothing made sense and the world was one of unfurling surprise. It seems to me that this would be a marvelous experience for a spectator of my magic to have. When I began to consider this, I saw the importance of eliciting

emotions with the magic, to give it a deep resonance and to provide an emotive journey of some sort for my audiences.

May I suggest that your aim as a magician is to create and manipulate wonder and astonishment while avoiding confusion and mere puzzle solving on the part of the spectator. There is an inherent beauty in possibly all effects, something that can be found and brought out. If the audience find a sense of that beauty, and even artistry, it will be easier for you to help them attach an emotional meaning to the effect.

Derren Brown

Pure Effect

2000

DERREN BROWN

Derren Brown's writings are, I believe, among the most significant of the last two decades. By his choice, *Pure Effect* and *Absolute Magic* are extremely hard to find; Brown wishes to keep his many public fans from discovering these writings. I am forever in his debt for allowing us to republish some of his most poignant thoughts in this collection.



Growing as a magician is not about agreeing with everything we're told. These essays are persuasive, but above all they are meant to challenge us—to make us question what we believe. I say this because I have come to disagree with the main thesis of Mr. Close's essay, which follows. So why is it included here?

Maybe I was just in the right place at the right time, but as a boy, I saw Michael Close perform and speak often. His words influenced me—perhaps more than any other magician. When he wrote that “the biggest...lie in magic is this: It's fun to be fooled,” I listened. I adjusted my thoughts and performances accordingly.

But over time, my experience contradicted that of Mr. Close. I have come to believe that for all but the most insecure among us, being fooled is a blast. I love when an unexpected movie ending surprises me. I love puzzles I can't quite figure out, and I relish the times when a magic trick completely fools me. Unapologetically, I love to be fooled, and so do most spectators I encounter. The idea of changing the way we deliver our magic to soften the impact on a spectator's ego is, to me, a mistake.

Yet I believe this essay to be invaluable to my development as a magician, not because I agree or disagree with the content, but because it challenged me to think deeper about my work. Whether your experiences are closer to Michael's or my own, if this essay helps you crystallize your feelings on the matter, you will have taken a giant step forward in your magical development.

THE BIG LIE

BY MICHAEL CLOSE

As magicians, lying is part of our arsenal of weapons. Without concealing or distorting the truth there is no deception. Unfortunately, we also lie to ourselves. The biggest and most insidious lie is the one we saw on our first magic catalogue or in our first magic shop. Here is the lie:

IT'S FUN TO BE FOOLED!

This is a hurtful fabrication. It is not fun to be fooled. People do not like to be fooled. If it were fun to be fooled then Richard Nixon would still be President of the United States. The nature being demands seeking out answers to that which cannot be explained. People can become indignant, angry, or resentful if they are deceived. Being fooled is not a pleasant experience. Anyone who tells you differently is naive, stupid, or trying to sell you something.

But the definition of magic I am using demands that the spectators be fooled. If the spectators can concoct any satisfying solution then there is no magic. This is a dilemma; to accomplish my goal I must do the most hurtful thing possible to the spectators. What

can I do? How do I soften the impact of the hurt and ease any possible resentment that the spectators may feel toward me?

This problem of how to structure a routine in such a way that it minimizes the negative aspects of being fooled is of major importance. Unfortunately, few magicians are even aware of the Big Lie, and fewer still have ever considered how to solve the problem.

Curiously enough, someone has done research into this problem, and has developed results that point toward workable solutions. What is even more curious is that this information is almost totally unknown to magicians. This is magic's loss, and I intend to rectify the situation now. The information you are about to learn will lead us away from The Big Lie (and all its related trauma) and will head it out of the woods.

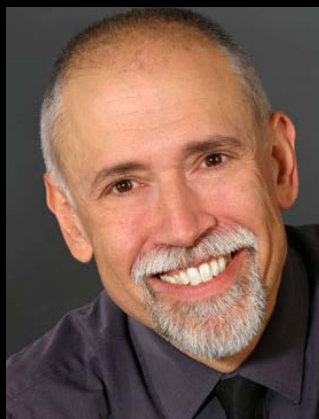
DR. NAGLER'S STUDY

Some months ago I was having a phone conversation with Scotty York. During the chat Scotty asked if I was familiar with a book called *Your Audience Really Doesn't Like Being Fooled* written by Dr. William Nagler. I was unfamiliar with this work. Scotty sent me some information. What I read came as both a revelation and vindication, since what Dr. Nagler had discovered in a laboratory setting totally agreed with what I had stumbled on through 14 years of performing for real people.

Dr. Nagler's study sprang from knowing about The Big Lie. Using more than 50 students as subjects, Dr. Nagler and his associates recorded both physiological and psychological data as the subjects watched magic performances. From this data Dr. Nagler extrapolated four approaches that would minimize the negative effects of being fooled. I was surprised to discover that those routines in my repertoire that I felt were the most effective fell into one or more of these categories. Through trial and error, over a long period of time, without realizing what I was doing,

MICHAEL CLOSE

Semantic debates rage on as to whether or not magic is an art form. Magicians like Michael Close make it clear that the very best magicians are artists. One need only read his five-volume *Workers* series to witness a man who creates personalized, autobiographical presentations, original magic effects and plots, and who thinks deeply about the potential of magic.



I had structured my routines to minimize audience animosity. Dr. Nagler's four categories are: Conspiratorial, Triumphant, Distancing, and Non-magic. I will explain each one.

Conspiratorial approach: the magician takes the spectator in his confidence, as if both were unable to understand why the trick works. My angle on this approach is, as much as possible, to have the spectator be responsible for the magic. Examples of this are Dr. Strangetrick and The El Cheepo Magic Club. The spectator is the one doing the trick. I'm as amazed as everyone else.

Triumphant approach: the trick has apparently failed, but the magician pulls it out at the end. This has the aspect of a sucker trick, but you don't shove the spectators' noses in it. While most people hate to be fooled, they also don't like to see a performer screw up a trick. When the trick has apparently gone astray, the spectators feel sorry for the magician. When the magician triumphs over apparent failure the spectators cheer his success, even though it means that they were fooled. An example of this occurs at the end of The Frog Prince, where it seems the frog found the wrong card.

Distancing approach: the magician removes himself one step away from the action by couching the entire trick in terms of a story. Almost every trick I do involves this approach to some extent, but good examples are The Pothole Trick and A Visit From Rocco.

Non-magic approach: the comedy and by-play involved in the routine is really more important than the magic. Down for the Count is an example of this. These types of routines are important; it isn't vital that every routine be a brain-basher. If

I perform three tricks at a table it is likely that the middle trick will be of this type.

If you examine the routines in the *Workers* series you will find that they fit into one or more of these categories. You can understand why I was both surprised and vindicated. I always knew that these routines “worked,” but now I knew why.

In addition to Dr. Nagler’s four categories I would offer two more suggestions, one from Alex Elmsley and one from myself. Elmsley suggested that if the spectators could anticipate the climax of a routine an instant before it happened, then even though they would be fooled they would feel some sense of accomplishment. I would agree with this assessment with the following warning: the technical requirements of the trick must be completed before the point in time when the spectators anticipate the climax. Here’s what I mean: At the end of *The Frog Prince* the spectators realize the folded-up frog is going to be the selected card. But at the point that they realize this, the frog has already been switched. I am clean. Technically, the trick is over. But, as I mentioned in the last chapter, *The Card in the Box*, the spectator anticipation happens at the wrong time. They realize the card in the box will be the spectator’s card, but I haven’t switched it yet! I hope this clarifies my point.

One more suggested approach I would offer is this: the last trick of your performance need not fall into one of the above categories. After all, at the end of this trick you are leaving, so it is not vital that you be nice. *The Big Surprise* is not a “nice” trick. It kicks people in the head. But I don’t care, because I’m walking offstage. I want people to remember me and the best way to accomplish that is to fool them to death just before I leave.

WE'RE BACK HOME

I think we've had enough of a walk for one day. I did not discuss the theatrical structuring of a routine, but that can be a topic for another time. In this regard, though, some of the best advice on the subject was offered by Alex Elmsley. He suggested that at every point in time in a routine we ask ourselves two questions:

1. Is something of interest happening?
2. Can the audience appreciate the effect?

Elmsley's exposition on these two questions is required reading for anyone who is interested in presentation and showmanship. His entire essay can be found in *The Collected Works of Alex Elmsley*, pages 3-14.

This wraps up the first part of my magical filtration system. Other essays will examine other elements. I hope that the above information will be useful as you build your own sieve.

Michael Close
Workers 3
1993

PIT HARTLING

Pit Hartling's fantastic *Card Fictions* proves that you can't judge things by their size. His work is cut from the finest cloth: every routine breaks new ground, has an integrated presentation, and a smart method.



To know what our spectators are thinking during a magic effect, we must train ourselves to think like our spectators. At the highest level, this means anticipating a spectator's thoughts, words, and actions before they even occur to the spectator! It sounds more like a mentalism effect than a viable technique, but Pit Hartling shares with us several useful tactics on how we can influence and control the very thought-patterns of our audiences.

INDUCING CHALLENGES

BY PIT HARTLING

Let me shuffle the cards! Make it go to my pocket! Can you put the pieces together again?

During a lively session of Close-Up magic spectators occasionally suggest effects or conditions. While some of these suggestions are nothing more than little jokes (“Can you make my boss disappear?”), others are actual challenges, either meant to put the performer to the test or put forth in the hope to get to see some even more fascinating effect.

Getting challenged can be a problem: What if a spectator wants to shuffle the deck in the middle of your favourite memorized deck routine? What if you spent the last ten minutes to demonstrate your supposed ability to divine freely chosen cards and now a spectator takes out her own deck, picks any card and asks you to name it? Challenges can create awkward moments. Incidentally, I believe those moments are weak not because they show that our magic is “only” a work of fiction – that should be clear anyway – but because these moments are dramatically inconsistent. It’s like the old joke: Somebody knocks on the clairvoyant’s door and the master asks: “Who is it?”

But of course, there's also the other side of the story: Meeting a challenge usually generates reactions way out of proportion of the actual effect. I think two implications in particular make those moments so memorable: First, a spontaneous challenge apparently rules out advance preparation. Second, the performer seems to be able to achieve anything. Spectators' spontaneous challenges can lead to some of the strongest moments possible in the performance of Close-Up Magic.

So, are challenges good or bad? On the one hand we want to avoid dramatically weak moments; on the other hand we don't want to lose the potential for a sensation. What do we do? Do we design our performances to leave only very limited place for challenges and sacrifice some opportunities? Or do we encourage challenges and risk not being able to meet most of them? This article takes a closer look at a third approach: Why not try and prevent those challenges we cannot meet and at the same time induce challenges we can meet? If our spectators keep challenging us, but only with challenges we are well prepared to meet, we will have the best of both worlds.

The interesting point is that challenges do not seem to arise at random. They seem to be somehow triggered. If that were true, it would offer great opportunities: If we understood the causes for specific challenges, we could eliminate these causes in cases where want to avoid being challenged and create them in instances we'd love to be challenged. Of course, we cannot really look into our spectators' minds, so there can hardly be a general answer. The following are just a few observations that might hint in the right direction.

DESIRE

People tend to challenge us to do something desirable. This principle might account for challenges along the lines of: “Can you make a beer appear?”, “Can you make my boss disappear?” or “Get me a million dollars!”

SYMBOLISM

The “desire” principle might also apply at a more abstract, unconscious level. It has been argued that there are strong symbols inherent in certain magical effects. Let’s take “Triumph” as an example: A deck of cards is shuffled face-up/face-down. The result is a mess. This automatically seems to create a certain conflict that waits to be resolved. If a deck accidentally drops to the floor and the cards get mixed up, there is a reasonable chance the somebody suggests to “straighten them out by magic!” In contrast I have never been challenged to “magically mix the cards face-up/face-down.”

Of course, there may be independent reasons for that observation, other than some obscure “symbolism”, for example, is much more difficult to sort a deck than it is to mix it up. People might suggest using magic to put the cards in order simply because it saves work and time. But if that were true, how would we explain the same contrast in the case of “The Linking Rings?” Linking or unlinking the rings is equally impossible and takes about the same time. Nevertheless, one state seems to triggers a challenge much more frequently than the other: When we show two separate rings and link them together, chances are that after a while spectators will challenge us to take them apart again. When starting with two linked rings and taking them apart, however, the challenge to put them back together does not arise nearly as frequently. (And if it does it is mostly followed by the request to unlink the rings again.) Maybe the explanation

for these observations lies in symbolism? Might the unlinked condition of the rings be considered the more “relaxed,” “free,” “natural” state, while the linked condition contains an inherent conflict that cries to be resolved?

All well and good, but what does all this have to do with actual performance? A lot, I think. One practical consequence of the above observations about Triumph, for example, could be this: When performing an effect which ends with the deck in a face-up/face-down mess (like for example Darwin Ortiz’s “Blockbuster” out of *Cardshark* (Ortiz 1995) or “Party Animal” from *The Book* (The Flicking Fingers 1998)) be prepared for the challenge to “put the cards right again.” If you don’t want that to happen, place the cards away immediately or do something to prevent the challenge.

Or, and that’s the other way of dealing with the situation, immediately after the effect secretly straighten out the deck (using, for example, Lennart Green’s Angle Separation). Then briefly complain that this trick always leaves the deck in such a mess and wait for somebody to suggest you magically straighten the cards. If somebody takes the bait, you can milk the situation, first pretending that this is, of course, impossible, making the spectator insist, etc. and finally really doing it.

As an example of how to apply the concept of inducing challenges to a well-known effect, let’s take David Williamson’s “Torn and Restored Transpo” from *Williamson’s Wonders* (Kaufman 1989). At the end of the first phase of this routine, you are left with a selected card torn into four pieces. Again, this situation seems to contain an inherent symbolic conflict. Instead of simply continuing the routine (in the second phase the card is restored and in the third phase the creases are removed) you could pretend the trick is over. Pause and play with the pieces, arranging them on the table to form the card, etc. If there is any

truth in the theory of symbolism and my own experience is not just a collection of mere coincidences, somebody will sooner or later challenge you put the pieces “back together.” When that happens, you can be reluctant at first and dramatize the situation any way you see fit before finally actually doing it. This specific routine by David Williamson allows you to push the concept even further: You might easily cause somebody to challenge you to remove the creases by saying: “This leaves the card just as in the beginning! Brand new, just as it came from the factory!” With just the slightest bit of luck, this obviously wrong claim will provoke contradiction and cause somebody to point out that the card is still heavily creased. Pretend this is the most demanding crowd you have ever performed for and finish by effortlessly fulfilling even their most extravagant wishes.

PAST EXPERIENCE

Apparently, challenges can be triggered by past experience. Suppose during your act you make cards appear out of thin air. Later somebody asks for a business card and you cannot find one. There’s a reasonable chance somebody will half-jokingly suggest you just reach out and grab one from the air!” Similarly, if you perform “Miser’s Dream” and later are a quarter short to pay your drink; don’t be surprised to get challenged.

One more example: During an effect you give a spectator a deck of cards to keep in his pocket and impress upon him not to let you touch the cards. After successfully finishing the trick retrieve the deck and continue with some other effects. A few tricks later you hand the same spectator a deck for safekeeping, this time without the request not to let you touch them. When you ask him to give you the deck near the end of this trick, he might remember the previous conditions and refuse to give you the cards, instead challenging you to let him count the cards (or whatever). Needless to say, you have designed the routine

in such a way that you can now pretend to be in major trouble while in fact easily being able to meet the challenge.

Apart from desires, symbolism and past experience, certain verbal structures seem to hold potential to induce challenges:

WRONG CLAIMS

Inducing the challenge to remove the creases in David Williamson's routine introduced yet another strategy to trigger a challenge: Provoking a contradiction by claiming something that is obviously wrong. Even though it is not included in the description, I am currently experimenting with this in the finale of *Colour Sense*. Before naming the suit and value of the last card, I say: "You see; I can feel everything about the cards. Red, Black – everything there is to know about a playing card!" This might sound bold and obvious, but a few times already somebody said: "Can you also see the suit?!"

EMPHASIS

After secretly loading a card into a spectator's pocket, instead of simply having him reach inside and be surprised, you could try to induce a challenge through emphasis as follows: Make a duplicate travel to your pocket. Return it to the deck, steal out the card and announce you will do it again, only "more difficult." Place the deck far away and again remove the card from your pocket. This time when you say: "and once more, the card is in my pocket!" put some emphasis on the word "my." If you try this for yourself right now, you might find that emphasizing that word brings to mind the phrase "as opposed to somebody else's pocket." If necessary repeat the short effect together with a similar sentence and the same emphasis. You may feel this is like waving a huge red sign but when the spectator finally

suggests you make the card appear in his pocket, he will usually have no doubt it was his own idea.

AMBIGUOUS COMMUNICATION/APPARENT MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Another way to make spectators request something is actually to suggest it yourself without actually saying so. To stay with the card-to-pocket example: After having made the card travel to your pocket a few times, say: "And of course, it can go to any pocket!" and at the same time clearly gesture towards him/his pocket.

Immediately follow with "This one or that one..." this time pointing to various pockets on your own person. Even though the first part of the sentence clearly communicated the idea of the card going to the spectator's pocket, you have not actually said anything to that effect. This allows you credibly to deny that the idea has ever crossed your mind. (You, of course, meant any of your own pockets!) To the spectator, it will seem like a short misunderstanding, at most. But now that the challenge is out, let's see you do it! Well, if you insist...

Incidentally, a simple way to give the impression of not having planned anything and at the same time make your spectators insist on their challenge is to pretend not to understand. For example you might say: "What do you mean, in your pocket?" spectator will repeat his idea, explaining it even more clearly. This will almost automatically sound like a challenge and give a very clear conflict.

These few examples should suffice to show that, like so many things in magic, challenges are a question of balance. On the one hand the strategies must clear and bold enough actually to work and trigger the correct challenge at least some of the time. On

the other hand one must avoid falling back on a sledge-hammer that would make the procedure obvious.

And at the risk of stating the obvious, one last important point: When meeting an induced challenge, the situation and final effect must appear unrehearsed. You are seemingly just picking up a spectator's spontaneous idea. This is not the moment for elaborate "presentation" or carefully scripted poetry in rhyme and metre.

CREDITS AND COMMENTS

While I am not aware of any written discussion of this concept, I certainly do not claim any originality. There are countless examples of the strategy in action in the performances of (mostly close-up) magicians all over the world.

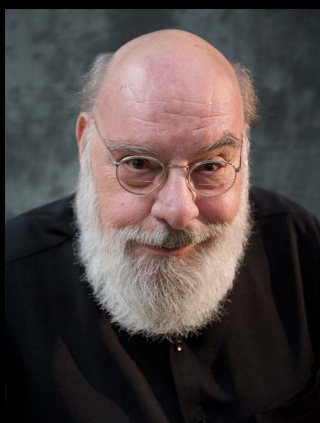
SYMBOLISM

One of the first to explicitly talk about the role of symbolism in magic was Juan Tamariz. Some of his early writings on this topic can be found in the *Circular*, the organ of the "Escuela de la Magia de Madrid." A thorough discussion is to be included in his upcoming work *The Magic Rainbow*. Anything I may know about these things, I learned from Juan.

Pit Hartling
Card Fictions
2003

EUGENE BURGER

Eugene Burger's influence on the theory of magic is tremendous, and his presence greatly affected the way I viewed magic. When I first saw him perform, I saw a magician who had different *objectives* than other performers I had seen. And, I'm not the only one in these pages moved by Eugene's performance. Derren Brown relates a similar story on page 453.



Eugene Burger gives serious consideration to his audience's thoughts and interests. Here he takes us on a journey that ends with a beginning: we are taken through the steps he followed to create his opening line—and I think it's one of the all-time great opening lines.

*Eugene's essay operates on his assumption that "Magic tricks really are not very entertaining in and of themselves." This is a notion also put forth by Dariel Fitzkee in *Showmanship for Magicians*. My experience—which falls thirty years short of Eugene's—is that this is entirely conditional. (Darwin Ortiz also disagrees, and refers to this notion as "Fitzkee's Fallacy" on page 247). I have encountered many people who, as Eugene points out, find magic an "unwelcome intrusion." But I have encountered at least as many people who are infinitely amazed by the visceral acts of magic tricks—with or without elaborate presentations.*

Whether or not you make the same assumption Eugene does, every performance you give must include certain assumptions about your audience. These assumptions are predictions, really, about how your audience will perceive you and your material. Know what these assumptions are, and identify the outcomes of being right...or wrong.

CREATING INTEREST

BY EUGENE BURGER

Every exploration begins somewhere. If I want to visit Los Angeles, for example, I must begin from somewhere else, from someplace concrete— Chicago or New York or Piggly Falls. In much the same way, every exploration of an area of thought and action, such as conjuring, begins with the assumptions and preconceptions of the explorer.

Every thinker has his assumptions—those accumulated beliefs which seem so perfectly obvious to him that he wonders why everyone else doesn't share them as well. I tell you this because I want to explain one of my most fundamental magical assumptions—even though it might strike some readers as being highly unorthodox if not downright heretical. The assumption is this: Magic tricks really are not very entertaining in and of themselves.

In my own work I assume this to be true. I assume that strangers really are not very interested in watching card tricks, that they might even find the idea of watching a card trick an unwelcome intrusion into other, more personally interesting things currently happening in their own time and space. In other words, while the fact that the Seven of Clubs and the Four of Diamonds have changed places on the table may make most magicians sit up

and take notice, for the average layman ... well ... it's most likely to be seen as a bit trivial.

I think this is a good assumption for magicians to make because it explains why the performance of card tricks can so easily generate the response of resistance and sometimes even hostility from spectators. The fact is that people often find it irritating, and not entertaining, to be confronted with other people who know things that they do not know. In the same way, while in a formal setting such as a concert or a Las Vegas show, people may enjoy seeing other people in the spotlight, in an informal setting these very same people often do not enjoy other people being in the spotlight because the truth is that they, themselves, would rather be the center of everyone's attention. Excuse the pun: Doing card tricks, especially for a living, is a tricky business.

In my own work, I repeat, I assume that people do not find magic entertaining. And I therefore assume, further, that it is my job to figure out how to get people interested in watching the card tricks that I do to pay my rent. Creating interest—this is the challenge and opportunity of close-up performing. If I want to make an impact upon a group of people, the first thing I must do is get them genuinely interested in what I am doing. This is critically important. If I fail to create this interest, the impact that I will be able to make will, of necessity, be minimal.

The first step is to be interested myself. Sometimes modestly; sometimes passionately. If I want spectators to become interested in my magic, they must perceive me as being interested in it myself. If I want them to think it is important, I must think it is important.

Two people are talking in a restaurant lounge. I am the magician and I watch them. They are talking with each other, yes, but they are also looking about the room, watching other people as

they enter and leave. I watch their eyes. They are not talking about lost or found love. They are not talking about business. If I am observant, I can see this simply by watching them. Their interest in the room, in “what’s happening here” is obvious to me if I am watching.

I must make my approach. I prefer my arrival to coincide with a time when they are not talking to each other, when they are quietly looking about the room.

I approach. I stand in front of them. They look at me, I smile and look at each of them in the eyes, pause, and say, *“I’m the magician here. Would you like to see the greatest card trick of the 20th century?”*

My smile broadens. They smile too. Their smile says, “yes,” but I want them to say the *word*. I want them to begin to participate in what I will create. I do not want them to be passive spectators (how absolutely dull!). I want them to be participants. Do you see the difference?

I want them to become interested. Yet it is I who must stimulate their interest. I must win their interest.

There are so many other things in this room at the moment that are also reaching out for their attention—the lights, the decor, other people (“cruising” as it is called), the music, the need to go to the bathroom, the desire to buy a package of cigarettes, the list of things that might be competing for their attention is endless.

I am the magician and I want their attention and so I must create interest in what I am doing I must win their interest and their attention from other things also reaching out to them.

The smile is important. Above all. I do not want to appear as a threat or as some “crazy” - remember we are in a restaurant lounge. This isn’t a costume party or a seance, two other performing settings with which I have had considerable experience, where one can execute one’s “approach” in a way and manner that is more extreme, further out, and even bizarre. No. Now I am in a restaurant and I don’t want people to scream in fear. Later, after the show has started, they may scream in delight, of course, because such laughter and screams of fun will make other patrons wonder what these people are doing which seems to be so enjoyable.

I must win their interest. I do this through my manner. I do it through my dress, I am wearing a tuxedo. The attire of the patrons in this restaurant, on the other hand might be very casual. The tuxedo helps. The tuxedo makes my approach so much easier. Obviously, I am “officially” the magician – and not some bozo off the street wandering around, coming on to the patrons. My tuxedo, my costume for my *role* as a magician, protects me from many unpleasant situations which could otherwise accidentally arise.

From their perception, here is this magician and he seems as though he might be fun and he’s going to show us the greatest card trick of the 20th century!

Well, yes, this approach is based on delivering the goods. I mean you must now perform the greatest card trick of the 20th century. But, you may exclaim, “I’m not sure I know the greatest card trick of the 20th century!”

Relax. I think you do.

Personally, at this point, I perform my own handling of “Card Warp.” Not only is this a very strong card trick, my presentation

is short and direct. There isn't a lot of folding and proving and unfolding and proving some more—which, after a few drinks, is usually too confusing for the spectators on the one hand, and slows down the action on the other.

Stop! Don't you see that "the greatest card trick of the 20th century" at this time and place is any card trick that you perform very well and that is direct and surprising? Let's exclude those tricks wherein the spectator is asked to count five heaps of five cards each six times, etc., etc., etc.

You must do this trick well. You must sell it. What does that mean?

It means, I submit, that you must know your material so well that your hands and mouth are, so to speak, on automatic pilot and your attention is consequently not on making sure the trick works (you know it will work!—or, at least, you know that you can get out of any disaster which the Fates might suddenly toss in your path). Your attention, rather, is on communicating with these people, your audience. It means looking at them, smiling, talking with them, listening to them when they talk. You can do this because you know this trick inside out; you have practiced it and rehearsed it and you know that your performance of it has impact. You know it will produce a good response from your audience.

At this moment, in this time and space "the greatest card trick of the 20th century" is the card trick you know the best, that you can perform very, very well, and that is itself direct, deceptive, and surprising.

It doesn't need to be any one trick. Hopefully, every magician will have his own "greatest card trick of the 20th century." If every magician did have his own, wouldn't magic-land be a

lot more exciting and fun for everyone? And so, I deliver on my promise. As far as these people are concerned, they will see something really baffling and, as far as they know, it might very well be “the greatest card trick of the 20th century.”

If I have caught their interest, if I have won their attention, if they have been really fooled, then they will want to see more. They are beginning to relax. This is fun, after all, and the truth is that many people in bars and lounges, even those present in groups, often feel alone. But now, suddenly, they are no longer alone. For a moment, for this instant, “this marvelously official magician in his tuxedo is performing his wonders for *me!*”

The psychology of the singles bar scene is quite fascinating. People steam into such bars looking, often hoping, to meet someone and to become the center of his or her attention. Yet, in such places, meeting people is not often an easy thing to do. As a magician, I attempt to bring groups of people together. No one told me to do this: It isn't part of my job description. It is simply something I do. I introduce people to each other. I get their names and repeat them and use their names and, thereby, remember their names—and I see myself as the “unofficial host” in this room—whose job is not to see that the towels are changed in the men's room (I'll let the “official host,” the room manager, do that!), but to bring groups of people together in this room that gets progressively more crowded with people as the evening wears on—until, when I finally leave, it is very often so packed with people everywhere that I am pleased to walk out into the fresh, late evening air.

If I am performing at a cocktail party or a reception, I usually want to arrive before any of the guests. As the guests begin arriving, very often people do not know each other and, if I were not there, would stand apart in little groupings, isolated and watching. In such settings, too, I will bring these groups of

people together. I will have everyone tell me their names and I will encourage everyone to interact with me and with each other. When I leave this group, they will be talking with each other. And that, my friends, is real magic! And I will go on to other groups at the party, working my wonders and bringing these new groups of people together as well.

Being a magician involves much more than simply performing one's magic tricks well.

In his marvelous Preface to *How to Perform Instant Magic* (Domus Books, 1980), Jay Marshall sets down "the ABC secret formula for learning magic":

- A. Learn how the trick is done.
- B. Learn how to do it.
- C. Figure out how to present it.

When I first read this Preface, I thought to myself: "Good for you, Jay; you've said it all in a nutshell!"

Jay admits that the third step, figuring out how to present the magic we've finally learned to do, is the tough one, and that the start of being great is being different, yet acceptable and amusing. Learning how to present magic before audiences, he says, is an individual thing and the real secret is to study and think for yourself.

When I begin to work on a new presentation, I usually spend the greatest amount of time on the presentation's opening line. I want the opening line to create interest in what is to follow. I want the opening line to hook them, so to speak, and therefore, I very often use the technique of the direct question—the question

mark being the sign of the hook (as Fritz Perls, the father of Gestalt therapy, was so fond of pointing out).

“Would you like to see the greatest card trick of the 20th century?”

It’s a direct question calling for a response. “Yes, I would.” “No, I wouldn’t.” The number of people who have said “No” to that question, as I have asked it, is surprisingly small and I have asked the question of thousands of people.

Eugene Burger
Intimate Power
1983

In the next piece, Sam Sharpe wisely points out that we cannot simply think of magicians and effects as “good” and “bad,” but in terms of the right fit for the intended audience. I think this is a blind spot for magicians, and in magic writing. Few have discussed the topic Mr. Sharpe raises here, and he goes on to qualify what he believes the “best” situation for magic is: a sophisticated audience watching a sophisticated brand of magic.

Written in 1932, the essay’s message feels fresh and topical, even if the writing and examples are dated (you’re about to read a reference to the “fox trot” dance step).

POPULARITY

BY S.H. SHARPE

A production which is popular with the public is always sound in a sense, for the first aim of art is entertainment, and if the public show their approval, then all the critics in the world cannot alter their verdict. It is important to realise this. The public is always the final judge, and though the critics may deplore their taste, the fact remains. The highbrow is not willing to admit this. He pretends to despise public favour and consequently his work remains in obscurity.

If we consider any recognised work of art, we find that, due to its masterly simplicity, its appeal is almost universal. It probably appeals to different people in different ways, some enjoying its superficial effect; others, its profundity; but all gain some kind of pleasure from it. Then again, works of art are not produced according to a formula. As Francis Bacon says in his essay on Beauty,

There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion. A man cannot tell whether Apelles or Albrecht Dürer were the more trifler; whether the one would make a personage by geometrical proportions, the other by taking the best parts out of divers faces, to make one excellent...he must

do it by a kind of felicity (as a musician that maketh an excellent air in music) and not by rule.

What precepts are usually considered to govern their creation, resulting in Formal Art, are based on the analysis of works which have been successful in the past — that is to say, those which have gained public approval. A work of art which fails to give enjoyment fails in its primary purpose.

However, it sometimes happens that failure is due to work being presented to the wrong type of audience, or one in the wrong mood, for some people prefer sensation; others, spectacle, comedy, thought-provoking or awe inspiring entertainments. Some seek relaxation; some, stimulation; while others are not particular so long as they are amused. For there are those “who, for the most part, are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise” and must have comedy exaggerated into horse-play, and serious presentation into melodrama, before they can understand them.

If a person bound for Maskelyne’s Theatre found himself in the Queen’s Hall next door (through mistaking the entrances), he would probably be disappointed with the programme, because, though he might be an admirer of Sir Henry Wood’s conducting, it is unlikely that he would be in the mood for music. Another disadvantage is for the theatre to be inaccessible, uncomfortable, or usually given to presentations of a different character. If, then, a production fails, it must be due either to the thing itself, the presentation, the showmanship, or the audience.

Mr. Devant has stated, “One way of discovering the worth of a trick is very simple. Test it before an audience. If the trick passes that test, it is a good trick.” But should it fail, what then? It may be the audience or the conjurer, and not the effect, which is at fault. The average “man in the street,” on viewing one of

Epstein's sculptures, such as "Rima," will deride it. But only a prejudiced man or an ignoramus would agree with him offhand. It is a poor work of art that can be appreciated to the full with no more effort than is needed to enjoy the picture on a chocolate box or "Where's My Sugar Baby Now?" (fox trot).

This question of *vox populi*² is a debatable one. Is public opinion always right? I should be inclined to say "No," if by *the public* is meant any indiscriminate gathering of people. But where the audience is one composed of individuals of the kind to whom the work in question is directed, it seems to me that the mass opinion is likely to be final.

The slogan "It is not the trick, but the man" sounds conclusive, but it is not true, because though a beginner may fail with a good trick, an expert can never make a real success of a poor one. The slogan should be "It is not the trick, or the man, but both."

I have said earlier on that the audience may be satisfied with an inferior production. But, even so, such production may be justified if it amuses those whom it sets out to amuse. The question arises: if various kinds of production suit different sections of the community, which is really the best? (For each appears to be best to those who enjoy it most.)

The answer is, naturally, that which appeals to the highest intellect. This at once places those effects which are chiefly of a spectacular nature and capable of appreciation with little mental effort at the lower end of the scale, and those needing close concentration at the higher.

2. Latin phrase. "Voice of the people."

Though the first aim of a magician is to mystify, there is no reason why he should fail to provide material for reflection in addition.

In capable hands, "The Floating Ball" is a beautiful effect savouring of real magic, but if presented as "The Mysterious Universe" and given a suitable dramatic setting according to the producer's imagination, it becomes something more than mere entertainment by awakening some mysterious, indefinable faculty in the soul which seems to perceive things our physical senses are unable to transmit to consciousness.

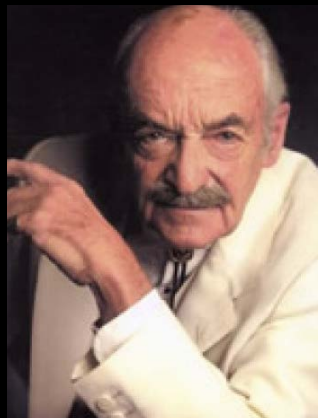
Of course, the deeper effects cannot be expected to appeal to the masses (it "pleased not the million; 'twas caviar to the general"), who only seek frivolity and triviality in their entertainments and to whom, therefore, it is a case of "What care I how fair she be, if she be not fair to *me*," where the higher flights are concerned. If we not only have our feet firmly planted on the earth, but our heads almost permanently bent towards it also, how can we be expected to think Apollo's music superior to Pan's?

A true work of art improves with repetition, and only on this account can it live through the ages. We delight in seeing classical effects presented time and time again within reason, but the more we see of the poorer ones, the more bored we become, though we may have enjoyed them on the first acquaintance. In this way, conjuring effects are like friends: the harder they are to know, the more they are likely to be worth knowing.

S.H. Sharpe
Neo-Magic
1932

RENE LAVAND

At the age of nine, René Lavand lost the use of his right hand in a car crash. The loss of a hand could have been a barrier to entry into magic; instead, it helps define Lavand's style. He developed moves and routines performable with only one hand, yet this only accounts for a portion of his singular success. Lavand has also developed an autobiographical style in which he recounts stories of his life through his magic. In his native Argentina, he is revered as much for his stories as he is for his magic.



In this chapter we have explored strategies to help us think like those we wish to deceive. Let's conclude on this subject with an essay by Argentina's René Lavand, whose brief, poetic essay mirrors exactly his style of performance.

SPECTATORS

BY RENE LAVAND

I have always liked to analyze the different reactions among audiences in an attempt to understand how to gear myself to each particular situation. I have been doing this for many years and, I must confess, although I can clearly differentiate reactions, I cannot find definitive answers to the question. There exists a range of audiences with different reactions, interminable gray areas that make up the psychology of the people that pay (or don't pay) to see us. Some audiences are irritated at not being able to rationalize the subtle deceit while others enjoy allowing themselves to be fooled.

Trying to find answers and simplify my task, I have eliminated the audiences who fall into the middle "gray" area and instead concentrate on the spectators at one extreme: the ones that cannot (or don't want to) let go of rationality. Among these rational ones, I have observed two main types: those who are irritated and complain about not being able to "let go of their rationalizing," and those who come to my show without any other motive than to solve the puzzle.

I try to imagine myself in the spectator's position. To what sort of audience do I belong? Sitting in a chair in front of a colleague, what do I try to do? I only want to enjoy the illusion. I am unarmed and have eliminated everything which might obscure my pleasure as a spectator.

There are audiences that express challenge to the magician, as if ready to discover the secret, refusing defiantly to be fooled, to see the artist as an opponent that is challenging them: "If you figure out the trick, you win. If you don't, I win. I ask them, "Do you want to kill your own illusion? Big mistake. Have you come to enjoy the tenderness of the marionette or to discover the strings that give it life?"

If books are written about how to enjoy music, I want to mention something about how to enjoy illusion: get rid of any preconceptions and sit back in your chair. Enjoy total relaxation which will permit the performer to communicate amiably. This posture allows you to hear his words more clearly, enabling you to savor the pauses. Your eyes will permit the enjoyment of the effect. Try to enjoy as a child, knowing what you know as an adult.

The most sophisticated audiences that I have been fortunate to perform for are not doubters, but those with special expectations who seem to say: "We don't want to know how you do it, thank you! We want to be children again." The powerful effect of excellent illusions artistically performed by an artist can last for years.

René Lavand

The Mysteries of My Life

1998

PART THREE



CATEGORIZING MAGIC

"USING WORDS TO DESCRIBE
MAGIC IS LIKE USING A
SCREWDRIVER TO CUT ROAST
BEEF."

-TOM ROBBINS

For as long as magicians have been conjuring, authors have tried to categorize magic tricks. They are generally of three minds. The first dissected magic with the impartial precision of a surgeon. The second has attempted to map the possibilities of magic the way an astronomer charts the constellations—with a mixture of what is possible and what we think might be possible. The third thinks the idea of categorizing magic is pure folly—that one cannot describe illusions the way we describe the anatomy of a frog or the contours of the Mediterranean Sea.

The father of modern conjuring, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin will lead us into this discussion with what I believe to be the first serious attempt to classify modern conjuring effects. He believed there to be six.

THE ART OF CONJURING

BY JEAN-EUGENE ROBERT-HOUDIN

To succeed as a conjuror, three things are essential — first, dexterity; second, dexterity; and third, dexterity.

The art of conjuring bases its deceptions upon manual dexterity, mental subtleties, and the surprising results which are produced by the sciences. The physical sciences — generally chemistry, mathematics, and particularly mechanics, electricity, and magnetism — supply potent weapons for the use of the magician.

In order to be a first-class conjuror, it is necessary, if not to have studied all these sciences thoroughly, at least to have acquired a general knowledge of them, and to be able to apply some few of their principles as the occasion may arise. The most indispensable requirement, however, for the successful practice of the magic art is great neatness of manipulation combined with special mental acuteness.

It is easy enough, no doubt, to play the conjuror without possessing either dexterity or mental ability. It is only necessary to lay in a stock of apparatus of that kind which of itself works the trick. This is what may be called the “false bottom” school of conjuring. Cleverness at this sort of work is of the same order as

that of the musician who produces a tune by turning the handle of a barrel-organ.

Such performers will never merit the title of skilled artists and can never hope to obtain any real success.

The art of conjuring is divided into several branches, namely:

1. *Feats of Dexterity*, requiring much study and persistent practice. The hands and the tongue are the only means used for the production of these illusions.

2. *Experiments in Natural Magic*: Expedients derived from the sciences, and which are worked in combination with feats of dexterity, the combined result constituting “conjuring tricks.”

3. *Mental Conjuring*: A control acquired over the will of the spectator; secret thoughts read by an ingenious system of diagnosis and sometimes compelled to take a particular direction by certain subtle artifices. (This category is the term I coined for the type of effects performed by Monsieur Alfred de Caston.)

4. *Pretended Mesmerism*: Imitation of mesmeric phenomena, Second Sight, clairvoyance, divination, trance, and catalepsy. (In 1847, Monsieur Lassaigne, the skilful conjuror, performed these type of effects with a rare perfection at the Salle Bonne-Nouvelle in Paris.)

5. *Mediumistic Phenomena*: Spiritualism, or pretended evocation of spirits, table turning, rapping, talking, and writing, mysterious cabinets, etc. (These mystical effects were presented in 1866 at the Salle Herz by the Davenport Brothers, and by the Stacey Brothers at the Theatre Robert-Houdin.)

6. There are in addition very many tricks which cannot be classified as belonging to any special branch of the art. These, which may be described as tricks of "parlour magic," rest either on some double meaning, some mere ruse, or on arithmetical combinations which involve a certain "key," or mode of working, but which do not require any dexterity or special cleverness. These tricks are generally made use of by persons who desire a ready means of exciting surprise and astonishment.

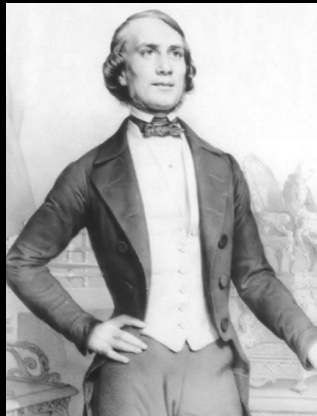
I propose to append, at the close of this work, a few of these tricks, which will constitute a special chapter, under the title, "How to become a wizard in a few minutes." (*Note from Todd Karr: As Professor Hoffmann pointed out, this chapter was not included in the book.*)

By Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin
Les Secrets de la Magie et de la Prestidigitation
1868

JEAN-EUGENE ROBERT-HOUDIN

Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin (1805-1871) has given magic as much as any other figure, from the tux, tails, and top hat attire to classic effects like "Second Sight" and "The Light and Heavy Chest," to the root of the most famous magician of all time (Houdin-"i").

Robert-Houdin's most famous contribution to the literature of magic is the following quote: "The magician is really an actor playing the part of a magician."



*Next up is an essay that has fallen into disfavor in the last two decades. In 1944, Dariel Fitzkee famously attempted to classify all magic tricks into 19 categories. In *The Trick Brain*, he went so far as to offer a systematic method for creating new effects, based more on lists and formulas than on critical thinking. On the whole, *The Trick Brain* fails because it treats the delicate act of creating magic like painting by numbers.*

But Fitzkee gets credit (at least from me) for his valiant effort to compartmentalize all effects into nineteen categories, expanding upon previous work by Robert-Houdin and S.H. Sharpe. I dispute how and where Fitzkee divides his list, but you would likely dispute any list I might create as well. You might even reject the notion that classifying effects is useful at all.

*Tom Stone (represented with his own clever writings on pg. 185) had these words for me when we discussed the inclusion of *The Trick Brain* essay:*

Fitzkee went wrong when he reduced all magic to 19 “basic effects” because he did it by removing all dramatic and emotional aspects from them. Why stop at 19, by the way? If reductionism is the game, the number could just as easily be 26, 177, or 8. Well, I know very well why he stopped at 19 — because had he continued the reduction, it would have exposed how silly the whole idea was. At the end of any reduction

of this kind, there will be only one single, basic effect left, which would be: "Something strange happens." Now, try to use that for anything productive!

Tom is harsh in his criticism of Fitzkee's essay (you should read the emails I haven't reproduced here). And his point is well taken. But I believe Tom overlooks one important use for lists of this kind. When I read essays like those sandwiching these words, my thoughts move immediately into problem-solving mode. My mind races, trying to identify effects that might not fit so neatly into these categories. And on the luckiest occasions, I come upon a useful idea. Not all the ideas are in a "new" category, but they came about by the mere act of trying to think "outside" the list.

Sometimes, to create something beyond the borders of what is thought possible, we must know exactly where those borders are.

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CLASSIFICATION OF EFFECTS

BY DARIEL FITZKEE

In *Showmanship for Magicians* I took the position that most of the secrets of the tricks we perform are quite simple. I really feel this to be true. Surely, in a world that produces the miracles of modern chemistry, the impossibilities of radio and radar, the genuine and important levitations of modern aeronautics, the black cord elastic which pulls the vanishing handkerchief from sight cannot be seriously considered as something profound or difficult to understand.

But a piecemeal dismemberment of each of the thousands of tricks in the repertoire of magic is impossible. It is impossible physically and quite definitely would result in the most gigantic triviality the world has ever witnessed. And it has had some luscious examples, even in my relatively brief time.

Far better and much more understandable would be the reduction of these thousands of tricks to a few broad classifications as to effects. In this form, a generalized discussion as to method might become of some practical value.

Our undertaking is simplified immediately when we discover that, while there are thousands of tricks, there are but few effects. A painstaking survey of a library of magic books and catalogues

will show a great variety of individual tricks. But they actually classify into a small group of basic accomplishments.

Perhaps it might be well to define just what is meant by the terms trick and effect.

Immediately I must take issue with Maskelyne and Devant in their interpretation of the word trick in *OUR MAGIC*. They make it clear in that work that they consider trick to mean the secret means of accomplishing a magical effect, the method, not the feat itself.

But general usage disputes this view—general usage and even dictionary terms. Trick usually means an individual feat of a magician. It means a particular and individual feat such as The Box Trick, The Needle Trick, The Ring Trick. It not only includes the general ultimate effect but also the specific identifying objects with which the effect is accomplished.

Therefore, throughout this work I shall use the word trick to mean the individual feat as accomplished with specific objects. On the other hand, where I refer to effect it must be understood that I mean the more general ultimate accomplishment without any reference to the objects with which it is done. In this way I shall be referring generally to such objectives as vanishes, penetrations, restorations and so on.

As an example: The trick known as *The Rod Through Glass* or *Clear Through*, as it was called when Massey first explained it in the initial issue of *THE SEVEN CIRCLES*, is a penetration effect. *The Egg Bag* is a trick. It is a combination effect which includes vanishes, productions, transpositions and, in some special routines, transformations.

The first attempt at a general classification of effects, of which I am aware, was made by T. Page Wright in the May, 1924, issue of *The Sphinx*. Although Mr. Wright's list was a sorting of card tricks to their basic components, whereas the present purpose is to treat with all magic effects generally, it will be of interest, I am certain, as a forerunner of what is to follow in this work.

CARD EFFECTS CLASSIFIED

By T. Page Wright

1. Production
2. Vanish
3. Transformation
4. Manipulative
5. Memorization
6. Guessing problems
7. Transposition
8. Location and revelation
9. Productions from cards (as water)
10. Indestructible card
11. Prophetic
12. Arranging of cards (as spellers, dealing hands, etc.)
13. Naming cards
14. Discovery of number selected or moved

Under the heading of transformations Mr. Wright included changes in the identity of the cards, changes of cards to other objects or the reverse, and changes in the shape or the condition of the card or cards.

The manipulative heading included both genuine feats of skill and impossibilities like balancing a card on a table.

Several sub-heads appeared under the location and revelation divisions.

Some months after the appearance of the Wright list, I started my own outline. But my list was one covering magic generally and not the card category alone. At that time my list included fifteen divisions which were later increased to include the list appearing later in this work.

Later, in 1932, S. H. Sharpe included a general list in NEO MAGIC. This was the first published list to come to my attention, covering magic generally. Mr. Sharpe's list follows:

ANALYSIS OF CONJURING FEATS

By S. H. Sharpe

1. Productions (From not being to being)
2. Disappearances (From being to not being)
3. Transformations (From being in this way to being in that)
4. Transpositions (From being here to being there)
5. Natural science laws defied
 - a. Anti-gravity
 - b. Magical animation
 - c. Magical control
 - d. Matter Through Matter
 - e. Multi-position
 - f. Restoration
 - g. Invulnerability
 - h. Rapid germination

6. Mental phenomena
 - a. Prediction
 - b. Divination
 - c. Clairvoyance
 - d. Telepathy or thought transference
 - e. Hypnotism
 - f. Memorization
 - g. Lightning calculations

With the eight subdivisions under the general heading of natural science laws defied, and the seven under the mental heading, Mr. Sharpe's list includes nineteen general divisions.

Some years ago, while visiting Percy Abbott's plant at Colon, Michigan, I had a long discussion in this connection with Winston Freer. Later, becoming interested in the subject, Mr. Freer developed his own list independently and published it in *THE LINKING RING*. His list differed materially from the Sharpe outline.

SEVENTEEN FUNDAMENTAL EFFECTS

By Winston Freer

1. Production
2. Vanish
3. Change in position
4. Change in material
5. Change in form
6. Change in color
7. Change in size
8. Change in temperature
9. Change in weight
10. Magnetism

11. Levitation
12. Penetration
13. Restoration
14. Remote control
15. Sympathy
16. Divination (Comprising all feats of mental magic)
17. Prediction

In analyzing a matter as complex as this it is not surprising that there is considerable diversity of opinion as to just what these divisions of general effects should be. So to be consistent, I am submitting here my own list which again is at variance with those outlined by others.

The work of making the necessary research in order to evolve such an outline is tremendous. Literally thousands of tricks, from explanations in magic books to the listings in numerous catalogues, were carefully scrutinized and weighed. After several years' consideration I am now submitting the outline of basic effects as I have analyzed the problem. While it is possible that some distinctly different effects may have escaped the search, I am firmly convinced that more than ninety-nine per cent of all tricks will fall within these classifications.

For that reason this present list is the one which shall prevail in this book.

THE NINETEEN BASIC EFFECTS

1. Production (Appearance, creation, multiplication)
2. Vanish (Disappearance, obliteration)
3. Transposition (Change in location)
4. Transformation (Change in appearance, character or identity)
5. Penetration (One solid through another)
6. Restoration (Making the destroyed whole)

7. Animation (Movement imparted to the inanimate)
8. Anti-Gravity (Levitation and change in weight)
9. Attraction (Mysterious adhesion)
10. Sympathetic Reaction (Sympathetic response)
11. Invulnerability (Injury proof)
12. Physical Anomaly (Contradictions, abnormalities, freaks)
13. Spectator Failure (Magicians' challenge)
14. Control (Mind over the inanimate)
15. Identification (Specific discovery)
16. Thought Reading (Mental perception, mind reading)
17. Thought Transmission (Thought projection and transference)
18. Prediction (Foretelling the future)
19. Extra-Sensory Perception (Unusual perception, other than mind)

In looking over this list it may be noticed that the effects start with physical accomplishments, gradually change to those of mental control and culminate in a number of divisions which are purely in the realm of mental magic. The first twelve belong to the physical group. The next two following carry a suggestion of mind dominance. And the last five are entirely mental in character.

A general explanation of the individual groups might be advisable.

Effect No. 1—Production. The production of a person or an object where nothing appeared before. Something is caused to come into view without apparent clue as to the source.

It may be suggested that the above list of effects does not include a separate classification for tricks of inexhaustible supply such as cigarettes from the air, repeated card productions. Neither

does it include multiplying effects such as the billiard balls, or rapid germination.

This was considered. But because effects of inexhaustible supply and multiplication are essentially repetitions of the basic effect of production, appearance or creation, the cumulative result was discarded as a fundamental. And I believe rapid germination is but another way of saying magical creation, which is what this classification is.

It has been the purpose in planning this work to reduce all general accomplishments to their lowest common denominators.

Effect No. 2 — VANISH. The causing of something to pass from sight by apparently unnatural means.

Obviously, this is the reverse of production. The reverse of inexhaustible supply would be, of course, infinite capacity. My research disclosed very few tricks in this category.

Viewing multiplication from the position of its reverse, multiple vanish, which is simply a series of vanishes, makes the decision to treat multiplication as a series of productions seem definitely more valid.

Effect No. 3 — TRANSPOSITION. Invisible change in location of a person or an object from one place to another. This effect has to do with a change in position. The object might vanish from the hand and reappear upon a nearby table. Or it might change place from one cylinder to another.

Reasoning basically, of course, the effect actually is a combination of a vanish and a later production elsewhere. Yet I believe the

audience views this as a single effect. To the spectator, the basis would be movement.

Effect No. 4—TRANSFORMATION. A person or an object changes identity, color, size, shape, character, etc.

Transformations and transpositions are closely allied. In a manner similar to transposition, this division is allied with production and vanish. However, in this classification the change relates to appearance or character, not to position, as is true of transposition.

Effect No. 5—PENETRATION. The solid matter of one person or object or thing penetrates the solid matter of another person, object or thing.

The penetration, of course, is made apparently without altering the penetrated subject which should show no place for passage. The penetration may be partial or complete.

Effect No. 6—RESTORATION. The subject of the effect is wholly or partially destroyed and subsequently restored to its original condition.

The restored object may or may not carry an identifying mark placed upon it prior to destruction.

Effect No. 7—ANIMATION. An inanimate object is mysteriously endowed with movement.

This is the apparent self movement or supernatural movement of an insensate object. Many of the pseudo spiritualistic tricks belong in this category. The animation may be done under

conditions which would insulate the object from outside assistance. Or the insulation may be dispensed with. The animation may be in the form of visible movement or it may be in the form of a result of unseen movement.

Effect No. 8—ANTI-GRAVITY. The person or thing reacts contrary to the laws of gravity.

Actually this effect comes very close in its external appearance to the following effect. Attraction, where magnetic suspension is suggested. Careful consideration led me to conclude that the spectator, however, would view the two effects differently. In one case, the subject would seem to float in air. In the other case, the subject would seem to be suspended by some magnetic-like affinity.

A suggestion was made that this section be broadened to include any effect which seems to be in defiance of natural law. But in analyzing this situation I concluded that this would be too broad, as the entire repertoire of magic would, or could, come under this heading.

It should be borne in mind that this class of effect includes not only those tricks in which something or someone rises and floats, but also those having to do with weight. Thus, The Houdin Light and Heavy Chest would belong here.

Effect No. 9—ATTRACTION. Through some mysterious power the magician becomes, or causes something or someone else to become endowed with a power resembling magnetism.

This may be a general power of attraction without discrimination as to person or thing. Or it may be selective, being only effective for certain materials or for some definite object.

Effect No. 10—SYMPATHETIC REACTION. A reaction of two or more persons, objects or persons and objects, showing sympathetic accord in harmony one with the other.

Here two or more persons think of, or do, the same things at the same time. Or two disconnected objects may react as if connected, as in *The Mora Wands*. Or whatever happens to one subject happens also, by apparent sympathetic response to the sympathetic subject, as in *The Sympathetic Silks*. The many *You Do As I Do* tricks come under this division.

Effect No. 11—INVULNERABILITY. Demonstrations of resistance or proof against injury.

This section includes exhibitions of fire eating, walking in red hot coals, walking on swords, lying on beds of spikes, rolling in barrels of broken glass, resistance to poisons and others of similar ilk -- Whatever trick purports to demonstrate any type of invulnerability to forces which would ordinarily destroy the subject should come within this division.

Effect No. 12—Physical Anomaly. Exceptions or contradictions to normal physical rules or reactions.

Under this identification come such tricks as *Walking Away From His Shadow*, *The Headless Woman*, *The Spider*, removing the thumb, stretching the neck and so on. This includes all contradictions, abnormalities and freaks, antinomies and other incongruities denying natural physical laws.

Effect No. 13—SPECTATOR FAILURE. This includes all tricks where a spectator is unable to accomplish some

apparently simple objective, implying the intervention of some mysterious power of the magician.

While it is true that the failure of the spectator may be caused by effects otherwise catalogued, such as vanishes, transpositions, transformations, etc., the essential is that the spectator fails to accomplish something because of an implied inability caused by the performer.

Effect No. 14—CONTROL. All effects where the mind of the performer seems to dominate, whether the subject be animate or inanimate.

However, hypnotism, being actually a separate field not normally included in magic, is not included here as it is the term which usually identifies mental control over a person, although this does not necessarily have to be the case.

Many effects, such as certain presentations of The Spirit Clock, The Rapping Hand and other tricks come under this specialized heading, under circumstances where the performer seems to exercise control.

Effect No. 15—IDENTIFICATION. Here discovery of an identity, regardless of the method of disclosure, is essential.

The discovery of a chosen card, whether it be discovered as the result of a count-down, spell-down, reversal, simple extraction or other method, is definitely within this classification. It is particularly important in card work.

But discovery may be applied to anything or anyone. Picking out the hidden “murderer” from among the spectators, as in one contact mind-reading routine, may belong to this division, if the

emphasis is placed upon the revealing of the identity instead of interpreting the “mental” directions of the transmitter.

Also included here are the various so-called divination tricks which depend upon the revelation of a secretly selected colored crayon, tag, pencil, rocket or other object.

This discovery may be made by the performer or by a spectator

Effect No. 16—THOUGHT READING. In this division the essential is that the performer apparently reads the thought of another.

This should be distinguished from the next classification with emphasis upon the performer taking the thought from another by active effort on his part only.

The thought may be written, spoken or known only to the spectator himself. The performer may disclose his knowledge by writing it, speaking it or by doing something suggested by the spectator’s thought. The disclosure may be made instantly or after the passage of an interval of time.

Effect No. 17—THOUGHT TRANSMISSION. The essential is the projection of thought. In the former effect, another’s mind is “read.” In this effect, one person projects his thought to another.

At one time I considered including both effects, 16 and 17, under one grouping, but the more I weighed the matter the more convinced I became that the spectator’s interpretation of the two effects is entirely different.

Of course, thought transmission need not only include projection from a spectator to a performer. In fact, most demonstrations are similar to that given by the Ushers. Here one performer, working the audience, appears to project his thought to another performer who is on the stage.

I do not believe that the spectator gets the impression that Mrs. Usher is reading Mr. Usher's mind. Rather, it seems to me the spectator feels that Mr. Usher is transmitting his thought to Mrs. Usher.

Effect No. 18—PREDICTION. This includes all tricks where the future is foretold.

Essential is that the performer—or even a spectator—commits himself as to the future behavior of someone else. The prediction may be uttered confidentially to a spectator. Or it may be written, or otherwise indicated in advance. It may have to do with future actions, thoughts or choices.

Effect No. 19—EXTRA-SENSORY PERCEPTION. This classification is intended to include all types of abnormal perception other than through mental communication.

Magic has many effects wherein people or objects are described through “seeing with the fingertips,” “smelling out the identity,” “feeling the spots on a card,” and other apparent impossibilities.

Effect No. 20—SKILL. (Not included in list.)

This is not essentially a magical effect. A sensational demonstration of phenomenal memory conveys an impression of special training. So also do various feats of skill exhibited

by performers, such as card jugglery, coin rolls, gambling demonstrations and such tricks as the eggs and glasses.

Even if the trick—and here I mean trick of skill as distinguished from trick of magic—as I started to say, even if the trick is done with some secret apparatus, the impression given to the spectator is nevertheless one of special training, not one of mystery as to the method of accomplishment.

By Dariel Fitzkee

The Trick Brain

1944

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Henning Nelms approaches this topic differently, and attempts only to argue the distinction between a trick and an illusion.

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TRICKS VS. ILLUSIONS

BY HENNING NELMS

Stage bullet-catching is a trick. It makes the audience wonder how it is done, but it does not persuade anyone, even momentarily, that the performer's magic renders him invulnerable to rifle fire. Robert-Houdin, on the other hand, created an illusion. He persuaded his audience that no bullet could harm him.

Unfortunately, conjurers have formed the habit of referring to any large trick as an "illusion." The term is used as a description of size. If the equipment is big enough, the trick is called an "illusion" even though a ten-year-old child can see through it. This careless use of language is likely to confuse our thinking. We shall not follow the custom. Instead, we shall call anything a "trick" which challenges its audience to discover how it was worked. We shall reserve illusion for those feats which actually convince the audience. In most cases, the conviction will be neither deeper nor more lasting than the conviction of an audience at Hamlet that the prince has been killed in a duel. However, this is all the theater needs to create drama—and it is all a conjurer needs to fascinate his audience instead of being content to provide a little amusement.

There is a tremendous difference between even such short-lived illusions and none at all. If a play fails to create any illusion,

it is worthless. On the other hand, if it succeeds in creating an illusion, the fact that the spell of the drama is broken with the fall of the curtain does not diminish its effect in the slightest. Fortunately for conjurers, a routine that fails to create an illusion is better than an unconvincing performance of a play.

It may still be highly entertaining as a trick. Nevertheless, as illusions have far more appeal to most audiences, there is no reason why we should not gratify them and ourselves by providing the additional interest.

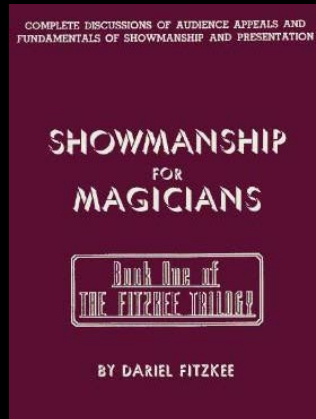
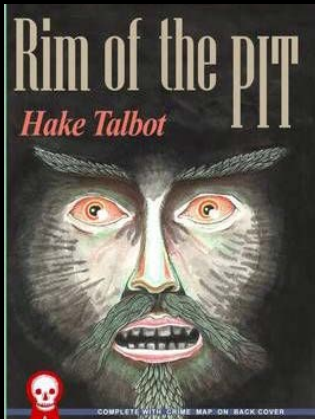
The difference between a trick and an illusion depends largely on the conjurer's attitude. Illusions take many different forms. But, in the most typical examples, the performer claims some specific, supernormal power and makes this claim as impressively as possible. He then indicates that the purpose of his performance is to demonstrate the power. He provides this demonstration, and it appears to prove his claim.

The conjurer who presents a trick usually begins by admitting that it is a trick. On the rare occasions when he pretends to have some remarkable power, he does it half-heartedly as though to say, "We all know that this is pure hokum, and that I only talk about magic, telepathy, or what not because it is part of the act." Such an attitude cannot create an illusion. If one actor in a play treated his part in this fashion, the play would fail. Furthermore, even when the man who performs a trick does claim a power, he usually leaves it vague; the trick is not treated as a demonstration of the power, and the effect does not prove the claim. He cannot expect to create an illusion, because neither he nor his audience knows what illusion he is trying to create.

Henning Nelms
Showmanship for Magicians
1969

HENNING NELMS

Henning Nelms (1900-1986) had a secret pseudonym that he wrote two acclaimed novels under: Hake Talbot. Talbot's *Rim of the Pit* is considered one of the finest "locked-room mysteries" ever written.



Juan Tamariz has written much on the theory of magic, yet precious little has been translated into the English language. I'm pleased Juan has allowed me to publish this essay in English for the first time.

It was written in part for the public, but the information is valuable to the serious student as well. I picked up on a few key details of the piece during translation. For example, when speaking of misdirection, he uses the word "deviate," as in deviating the spectator's attention. That word says a lot about how he views misdirection itself. He also refers to magic as "illusionism," and elegantly describes its definition. My favorite sentence is this:

Finally, in knowing the function of memory, a magician can create lagoons in the spectators' memories in order to make them forget whatever we wish for the magical effect, or to make them believe they remember things that in reality never existed.

The word "lagoons" is a powerful metaphor for those unperceived glitches in logic that the best magicians create in the minds of their spectators.

FUNDAMENTALS OF ILLUSIONISM

BY JUAN TAMARIZ

Illusionism makes visible what isn't really there. This is to say, it coaxes the senses of the spectators and it is accomplished through natural means. But you know this already. But what isn't as well-known is *how* the magician is using these natural means in order to evoke mystery.

It is commonly believed that the magician is a man who possesses great manual and digital dexterity, and uses a few special apparatuses. However, the first and most important thing that I have to say is this: the ability of the magician is not the most important thing, or even necessary for illusionism (except, perhaps, in the cases of manipulation acts).

The most important thing in magic is *talent*. Magic-specific talent, and art. The magical talent is based primarily on three aspects: psychology, creative ingenuity, and personality in presentation.

A. PSYCHOLOGY

Psychology is, without a doubt, the most essential aspect, and without it, it is practically impossible to be a good magician. I am referring to the knowledge (intuitive and acquired) of the psychological mechanisms of the minds of the spectators,

such as knowing in detail what “blind spots” are present in the spectator’s mechanisms of perception, attention, and memory.

This psychology also allows us to know when it is possible to achieve an illusion within their senses, and make them perceive things that are not really happening. We must study how our words and actions oscillate the attention of the spectator, using these moments where their attention is minimal to do the deceptive movement. In knowing how to manipulate people’s minds (in the good sense of course—let’s leave aside politics and propaganda) of the spectator in order to provoke drops in their attention at precise moments of a trick. This psychology allows us to deviate (physically or psychologically) their attention from the place where the secret technique will take place, or from the idea that could lead them to knowledge of such techniques.

Finally, in knowing the function of memory, a magician can create *lagoons* in the spectators’ memories in order to make them forget whatever we wish for the magical effect, or to make them believe they remember things that in reality never existed.

Since all of this is somewhat abstract, let’s look at some examples:

1. In order to lower their attention, the magician makes a handkerchief disappear, and now he is going to make it reappear. For this he needs a “secret sleight.” The attention of the spectators is focused at this moment. The magician, once he has finished the disappearance, shows his hands empty, relaxes his body, and begins to bow. The audience believes the trick has ended, and they also relax their attention and applaud. The magician takes advantage of this low attention: he takes hold of a handkerchief and keeps it palmed in his hand, and suddenly looks toward the empty space to his left. The attention builds

once again, with the magician pretends to pull the handkerchief from the air, secretly producing it from his palm.

I believe the difference is clear between this technique used by a deft magician and the mythical ability many people ascribe to him. It is not about doing something quickly (“the hand is quicker than the eye,”) or with great expertise, but in creating a convenient psychological process.

2. In order to deviate the attention: *misdirection*

A magician has made a red ball disappear, and is now going to make it reappear. He needs to do a secret movement. The magician asks the spectators, “*You all remember the size and color of the ball?*”

The spectators, who had their attention focused on the movements of the magician, continue to look at him but their mind—and their attention—is now divided. In one part they watch the hands of the magician, but the other is thinking of the little red ball. The magician executes the secret move, causing it to appear between his fingers as he says, “*it was like this, right?*”

3. Memory

The magician gives an envelope to a spectator in order to have it examined. He hands the spectator a deck of cards to shuffle, and also a pencil to sign the envelope with. While the spectator is signing the envelope with the pencil, the magician (in order to “help” him) takes back the deck of cards from the spectator’s hands. Immediately after signing the envelope, the magician returns the cards to the spectator. The magician takes one or two steps back, and requests the spectator to take the top card of the deck and to place it inside the envelope. At the end of

the trick, the “freely chosen” card inside the envelope matches a prediction made by the magician before the trick began.

The secret lies in the magician adding a card (secretly) to the top of the deck when he was holding the deck to help the spectator. We are not trying in this example to see the best way of masking the addition of this card, but rather in knowing how to make the spectator *forget* that the magician touched the deck after the spectator himself shuffled. This is to say, to make him believe the selection of the card (the top card of the shuffled deck), was freely chosen—or even better, based on chance. With this one memory erased, the effect of the prediction will be truly incomprehensible. After all, after a certain elapsed time and a few ups and downs (such as hanging the envelope on a thread in order to isolate it, etc.), the magician says: *“You examined the envelope, shuffled the deck, and placed a card inside the envelope, which you signed yourself. This means that the card was freely chosen, without the possibility of it being switched by any manipulation on my part, since I have been distanced at all times from it.”* Surely after this, the spectators will forget that the magician held the deck of cards for a few seconds (note that this is a simple example of the principle discussed, and is for illustration only).

B. CREATIVE INGENUITY AND TECHNICAL ABILITY

Creative ingenuity is important for creating new effects, to invent new techniques, sleights, manipulations, and sequences, as well as to design new apparatuses. Creative ingenuity is what characterizes the original magician. He is the one who presents personal effects, the one who constantly surprises, the one who is able to mystify even the most suspicious spectators, from

know-it-alls to the uninitiated. He is, in the end, what advances illusionism.

Technical and manipulative ability is, in some tricks (and only in some), important. In any case, I point out once more that it is not necessary, by any means, to possess special gifts of ability to be a good magician. Do not fear, reader who wishes to enter illusionism, the supposed (or real) lack of ability. If you have ability with your hands, fantastic! But if you do not, it doesn't matter. Only a few tricks will be out of your reach, but a great majority of the tricks are accessible to the person with normal or medium ability. Think of magicians like Argentina's René Lavand, who is an excellent magician—with only one hand.

C. PRESENTATION AND PERSONALITY

A magician must present the effects he presents well. By “well,” I mean that he must present the tricks appropriately (mentally, comically, visually) to the type of spectators that he has in front of him (an adult audience, children, the level of culture that the audience has), to the type of “frame” where you perform in (a theater, a banquet hall, television, a parlor, a house), to the circumstances of the event (in a professional setting, a children's party, a sanatorium, at a table amongst friends) and, finally, with a proper presentation for his personality.

It is not necessary that the magician be elegant, nor tall, nor good-looking. It is not necessary to be fun or dynamic. There are infinite varieties of presentation, but often only one is ideal for the personality of each magician. The magician must base the trick he or she presents on his own personality type.

If you have natural charisma, a presentation that is more sympathetic, friendly, and peppered with jokes and gags, will do well.

If you don't have this kind of personality, it will be absurd to portray yourself as a showman. Instead, perhaps you will be a magnificent magician with a pseudo-scientific presentation, or enigmatic. Unfortunately, we often see many magicians who look alike and perform with a persona that doesn't fit. As a consequence, they don't manage to connect with their spectators.

In conclusion:

It is easy to see how magicians make the magical emotion truly felt by their spectators: they use psychology to hide, creativity to be original, and an appropriate presentation to their personality, in order to transmit that little work of art that is, after all, mysterious, incomprehensible, and a beautiful magical effect.

Juan Tamariz
Secretos de Magia Potagia
1973

JUAN TAMARIZ

Juan Tamariz has been called the greatest living magician. He has astounded Spanish and international audiences on television, in large theaters, and up close. He has influenced a generation of magicians with his style, writings, and performance.



PARTFOUR



EFFECT

"TAKE A SIMPLE IDEA AND TAKE
IT SERIOUSLY."

-CHARLIE MUNGER

We spent the last section exploring various ways to slice, chop, separate, and dissect magic effects. Now we will look at “effect” itself, and the underpinnings that make great magic great.

We begin this chapter with one of the most notable twentieth-century contributions to magic literature: Rick Johnson’s celebrated essay, “The Too Perfect Theory.”

Many of the notable minds included in this collection have defended (Carney, Swiss, Close) or challenged (Ortiz, Wonder, Stone) this theory, and the debate will rage on. Eugene Burger took an insightful, oblique angle: “Man, when in an analytic state of mind, must have an answer or solution to those things that bewilder him.” Perhaps the context of an effect will determine how “perfectly” it will be perceived.

THE "TOO PERFECT" THEORY

BY RICK JOHANSSON

Recently there was a great brouhaha on a national basis brought about by a statement attributed to Dai Vernon, who was supposed to have said something to the effect that the spectator never or rarely was fooled by what a magician performed for him in the way of tricks. To Vernon's enemies, this was the long awaited proof that the grand old man had lost his grip; that the old Pharaoh had shuffled off his mortal coil. Even some Vernon disciples were of the impression that the Professor needed to mentally "rock and reweave." Others simply felt that the "old man" was suffering from some sort of senile phantasmagoria.

I don't know whether there ever was a full explanation in print by Vernon amplifying this statement, if indeed he did make it at all. I must admit that it sounds like something he would have said. It's pleasant to think that he might have. The battle brought about by this statement is over, but the wounds are still open and bleeding, and while I don't think Vernon needs or wants anyone to explain his thoughts, it does provide me with an opportunity to discuss a pet theory of mine.

It is a firm belief of mine, and I suspect that this was the underlying thought behind the famous or infamous statement

of the Professor's, that not only do we magicians not fool the spectator, but we should not—*correction*—we *must not* fool them. *It is by not fooling the spectator that we magicians are most effective.*

In order to understand and subsequently accept this “heretical” statement, we must first examine and agree upon two basic premises:

Premise 1. Twentieth Century man no longer attributes the “Magician” with supernatural powers.

Premise 2. To rational man, the unknown is unacceptable.

Premise 1: It's reasonable to assume that most will agree that, with the possible exception of a few uneducated and/or extremely superstitious people, most spectators realize that the miracles performed by the conjuror are brought about by natural, albeit clever and sneaky, means. The only exception to this rule would be in the area of mentalism.

Perhaps this would not have been valid in the not too distant past, but the rapid advances in our technology in the past couple of decades have made this a definite reality. A positive side effect of this phenomenon is that this society, made more sophisticated by both scientific advances and exposure to magician's methods from early childhood, now is more than willing to give the performer *full* credit for his miracles. 'Bout time too!

Premise 2: From the time of the early cave man, as curious as he was hairy, man has waged a never-ending battle, searching for reasons behind the mysteries which surround him. Think of the countless numbers of scientists and philosophers who have devoted their entire lives in search of the key to the riddles which besiege man at every turn. Think of the billions of dollars

and the number of man-hours spent in the past decade just to solve some of the mysteries of space.

In his early formative years and even now, man has often found himself ill equipped and unable to solve that which befuddled him. But man cannot live with the unsolvable, and from what scholars tell us very quickly developed the concept of an omniscient and omnipotent force or power to which or to whom he could attribute those unsolvables. The “to which’s” came first, the sun, the moon, the earth. The “to whom’s” came later as man developed a certain amount of sophistication and needed a personification with whom he might relate. They’ve taken many forms over the years, Isis, Buddha, Jehovah, God, but regardless of their form or identity, the concept is for an identical purpose—to provide man with a temporary placebo to allow him to live comfortably with that which he cannot understand. Now, that which is inexplicable (and therefore unacceptable) becomes “the wisdom of Allah” or “the Will of God.” an acceptable if not completely rational compromise.

Don’t forget either, that in many cases, yesterday’s “Will of God” has today become a virus, a gene, magnetic flux, gravity, etc. Please don’t think for a moment that the foregoing has been an attempt to prove or disprove the existence of a supreme power. This is neither the time nor the place for such a discussion and should be carried out by those eminently more qualified. It has merely served to develop properly the following three hypotheses:

- 1) Man will find or invent an answer for that which baffles him.
- 2) That answer need not be completely rational and/or consistent with available data.

3) Man is flexible in changing his answers in the light of more complete or acceptable data.

You may very well ask at this point, just what all this metaphysics has to do with the original statement and magic in general. Therefore ...

If we combine Premise 1 and the first two hypotheses developed in Premise 2, we can now understand why the spectator leaves the performance of a magician explaining or shrugging off all tricks done with a, "it went up his sleeve, " or a, "it's done with mirrors," or some such inane explanation, completely inconsistent with the facts. But to him it's an acceptable answer. An answer of the foregoing type usually indicates that the spectator is completely baffled and is grabbing at straws. In some cases, this is acceptable, but in others it can spell disaster. At its worst, the spectator can and will eliminate all solutions except one and in many cases that is the correct one ... at best he may take the credit away from the performer himself and relegate it to some mechanical contrivance or in the case of a card trick for example, assume it was a self-working trick or a trick deck. In either case, the magician winds up with the short end of the wand.

However, if we now introduce Hypothesis 3 we can easily see that the spectator is open to suggestion for his solution and in some cases, it would be wise for us to provide him with a possible solution of our own choosing, and which would accomplish the following:

- (1) Lead him away from the correct solution;
- (2) Be acceptable to him;

(3) Not detract from the effect of the trick;

(4) Give the magician full credit for his skill.

Just for a moment let's climb into the mind of a spectator who has just participated in a card trick. Let's listen to how his reasoning might be progressing ...

"Let me see now ... that sly old devil gave me a deck of cards, had me take them into the next room, shuffle them, select any one I wanted to, put the card back into the deck, put the deck in my pocket, and then come back into the room where he was. Then, without asking me any questions or even touching the deck, *he told me what card I took!*"

"Wonder how he did that? Probably a stacked deck ... but wait, it couldn't be ... I shuffled the deck. It's probably some clever sleight-of-hand, but that couldn't be either, 'cause he never touched the deck. Hmmm ... could be a trick deck, because it was his deck ... wonder what kind it could be? Eureka! A deck where all the cards are the same! I thought he went south with that deck awfully quick. That has to be it. Aren't I clever?"

Thus, we can see that by not pointing the spectator in another direction, we have allowed him to travel down a very dangerous path, one that leads him to the only possible open solution, and most probably the correct one. Correct or not, the result is the same—the spectator has claimed the credit for himself, or at best transferred the credit to the "trick deck." In either case, the effect, therefore the entertainment value is lost for the most part. It is then safe to postulate the tenets of the Too Perfect Theory:

SOME TRICKS, BY VIRTUE OF THEIR PERFECTION, BECOME IMPERFECT.

Conversely,

SOME TRICKS, BY VIRTUE OF THEIR IMPERFECTION, BECOME PERFECT.

As we have already tested the first half of the theory, let's now show, or attempt to show, how imperfection can perfect an effect, which is too perfect. Before commencing, it might be worth mentioning for the sake of completeness that there is another technique—that of eliminating all possible solutions. In the above, for example, we could use the spectator's own deck and leave it with him in his pocket when the trick is over. I'll leave that to you ... I'll take the easier path.

Now, to the job of "imperfecting." In the above example, there are a number of immediate possibilities that may or may not do the job.

- 1) Instead of the spectator leaving the room, merely have him stand at the opposite end of the room or just across the table from you. It might seemingly be less impossible this way.
- 2) Before commencing the trick, place two indifferent cards in the one-way deck, one at the bottom and one near the middle. Turn the deck face-up and cut at the indifferent card in the middle, then do a tight dovetail shuffle ... said shuffle is done in front of the spectators, of course.
- 3) Before disclosing the selected card, take the deck back from the spectator and "handle" it a bit. Perhaps instead of producing the card itself, magically cut to two cards, one which shows the value and the second one the suit. This is made easy by including those two cards in the deck to begin with. The chances are slight that the spectator will select them. They can be short cards for

easy location later. Another completely different approach is to have a “regular” deck in the coat pocket with the two indicator cards on top. Drop the deck that the spectator used in the same pocket, pull out dramatically the two indicator cards, and while the spectators are still in a state of shock, casually remove the regular deck and set it on the table, ready for the spectator to grab if he cares to. Another benefit of this approach is that this deck can be stacked for a miracle which you immediately go into, *with a deck shuffled by the spectator* (?).

4) You may really change the format of the effect by handling the deck a bit first, just a simple cut or so. Then ask the spectator to mentally spell the name of his card as you remove one card at a time from the top of the deck. Whenever he stops you, you have a miracle. Go into a “computer-type” presentation if you wish, with nothing to remember. The possibilities are endless. Just avoid the desire to eliminate all the imperfections.

As you can readily see in the above examples, the imperfections while weakening the effect from a strength standpoint, actually strengthen the effect from the standpoint that the spectator is led away from the actual method by being shown and pushed down numerous blind alleys—all of which should bring him to the conclusion, “I didn’t see that sly, old fox do a darned thing, but he had ample opportunity to do something sneaky. Gee! What a clever guy!”

Don’t forget ... we were working around the premise that a forcing deck was the method we wanted to use, and all the above suggestions were based on the use of that method. There are other methods for doing the same effect with regular cards. Ron Wilson has one of the best I’ve seen. Ask him to show it to you next time you’re at the Magic Castle.

Perhaps another short example in this area might be appropriate. Leo Behnke and I developed a routine that utilized a forcing deck and fooled some of the sharpest minds in magic. How? Simple. We interjected a couple of Faro shuffles into the routine. Now who in the world would have to Faro a forcing deck? It took the magicians down another path and away from the real method, didn't it? *Hooray* for imperfections!

There's a strong possibility that one of the greatest card tricks and principles to be developed in recent years is Gene Finnell's "Spelling The Aces" using the Free Cut Principle. But if you were among the many who did the effect just as it was explained in the directions, more often than not you heard one or more spectators comment, "HMMMMMMph! Must be a self-working trick! " Obviously you didn't get credit for the trick. In that form, *it's too perfect*. However, *if* just before spelling the Aces, you give the deck a false cut and shuffle and *then* bring the trick to its conclusion? Fancy finger flinging is fine—you're supposed to be doing something! The spectator's mental process probably will sound like this, "Man! That guy's hands must move like quicksilver. I didn't see him do a thing while he was shuffling the cards, but he must have done some sneaky sleight-of-hand that I couldn't catch. Decidedly clever! "Who got the credit this time?

Obviously all the above examples were self-working tricks that in order to be effective, the spectator had to be given the feeling that you were doing something. This seems to go against all that we've been taught all these years, doesn't it? But I think you'll agree that in these cases it was necessary. In each case, the spectator was led to believe that the magician had the opportunity and, in fact, did do something even though the spectator didn't catch it. Granted, this is not a complete or rational answer, but

remember it doesn't have to be in order to satisfy him. It doesn't even have to be consistent with the facts.

Now let's look at how the "Too Perfect Theory" might apply to tricks *depending* on sleight-of-hand: In order not to infringe on anyone's rights, let's take a real old chestnut. Working very close to the spectators with his sleeves rolled up, the magician reaches in his pocket, removes a handful of small change, selects a coin, places it in his left hand, closes his hand, makes a few mystic passes, and slowly opens his left hand to show the spectators that the coin has completely vanished!

Most of you will recognize that the trick is comprised of equal parts of both bluff and acting ability. The magician never picks a coin from his handful of change, he merely pretends to do so. His acting ability carries it from that point onwards. The problem that arises is that the spectator is led to the proper conclusion on some occasions. For these reasons:

- 1) The magician is working too close in his estimation to get away with too much.
 - 2) The magician could not have used his sleeves because they were rolled up.
- Ergo

"That sneaky devil didn't have a coin to begin with!"

Try this approach next time: As you are placing the discarded change back into your pocket, hold back a coin corresponding to the one you're supposedly holding in your other hand. (Do this by just resting your thumb on it.) Bring your hand out of your pocket, relaxed and palm downwards. As your right hand approaches the left, curl your left hand into a loose fist. Pretend to rub the "coin" on the back of your left hand. After a bit of this

business, open the fingers of your right hand to show that the coin has apparently vanished. Immediately turn the left hand over to show that the coin is now in that hand, nothing having vanished, but penetrated. What is the difference?

Let's jump inside the spectator's mind now and we'll find that he is subconsciously reasoning that if there is a coin at the climax, there must have been one in the beginning. Consciously he's thinking: "That damn guy is fast! He must have slipped that coin around his hand while I wasn't looking. *Clever!*"

There is another old effect attributed in my notebook to Milbourne Christopher, where a paper match is torn from a booklet containing a known number of matches. A spectator is given the booklet to hold, after which the magician lights the match he's torn out. The burnt match suddenly vanishes and the spectator finds it back in the booklet he has been holding. The match is not only burnt, but it's still firmly attached to the book. Additionally there is, upon counting the matches, one more match than when last counted. This serves to prove that the burned match really flew back and re-attached itself. Be honest now ... do you really think that the spectator believes this baloney or does he use his head and find himself led to the obvious conclusion that somehow you hid the extra match from sight? And if you fail to rapidly move onto another trick, he's bound to discover how you used the subtlety of bending the match downward at the beginning of the effect.

A very subtle and important imperfection is to have the match reappear in the booklet unattached! The effect is now believable and doesn't insult the spectator's intelligence. He's now willing to believe it's the same match and is more willing to give you

the credit for some pretty crafty work. There's no clue left as to how you did it. The cleverness is unseen. An additional touch:

Try reversing the burning procedure at the outset: Remove a match, but burn the whole book instead of the single match. This adds a bit of flash and color, doesn't it? It also subtly indicates that there couldn't be anything in the book untouched by the conflagration. Of course, the match reappears unburned and unattached. Different method? Yes.

Try pulling forward the striking surface of the matchbook just a bit and laying an unburned match in the little space between this area and the matches themselves, allowing the head of the match to protrude out of the left-hand side of the booklet, push the striking surface back into place and hold the matchbook between your left thumb and forefinger at the extreme left edge. The match, of course, is squeezed between and hidden by these fingers. Now you may obviously display the matchbook very fairly and much more openly. Bend the cover of the booklet back over and behind the booklet, holding it there with the pressure of your left second finger. Remove two matches, setting one aside and using the other one to light and burn the rest of the matches in the booklet. Patter a bit, giving the matches a chance to cool. (You may also use an already lighted cigarette to start the blaze.) In any event, after the matches have cooled, grasp the matchbook on its right edge with your right thumb and forefinger. Holding it firmly with these right fingers, slide your left thumb and forefinger along with the protruding match head upward along the left edge of the booklet. Obviously the match will pivot upwards onto the face of the booklet. Your hands rise slightly in order to cover this action. Now let go of the match

and close the booklet with your left fingers. Hand the booklet to the spectator and proceed according to the normal routine.

The preceding paragraphs have not intended to overlook the fact that many people have been doing and getting away with “too perfect” tricks for years without “imperfecting” them. I’m sure they have! But unless they were done at carefully chosen, psychologically correct times (with an abundant supply of acting ability thrown in for good measure), they could never have fooled anyone. More specifically, in order to be most mystifying, they could only be accomplished after first convincing the spectators by prior miracles; convincing them that you could do the impossible, then moving on rapidly to subsequent miracles of a sounder nature, preventing the spectators from giving the situation much thought. It follows that such effects, for the most part, could not stand alone or could not be used for a one-shot bit, an opening or closing effect. It should be apparent that by applying the “imperfecting” technique, otherwise shaky effects requiring a great deal of skill in placement and performance come close to being completely flexible and can be performed practically whenever the mood moves one.

Also please don’t misunderstand and assume for a moment that my argument claims or infers that all tricks should be “imperfected.” Many effects need not to be imperfected. Many cannot be imperfected. It’s a matter of cool judgment, best gained by examining an effect from a spectator’s point-of-view. It is also most evident that the “Too Perfect Theory” is most germane to the field of close-up magic; however. There are numerous examples of its application or need in the area of stage magic. It can also be applied to “mentalism.” The need here, however, is lessened by the fact that most people believe in or would like to believe in, the possibility of ESP.

In summary, the explanation of the “Too Perfect Theory” has attempted to point out that man must have an answer or solution to those things that bewilder him. It behooves magicians to avoid leaving a spectator one accurate path to follow, leading to the *modus operandi*; or to leave the onlooker paths that take credit away from the magician himself. It’s better to direct the spectator to follow a path of the magician’s own choosing, leading him to the conclusion that the magician is “some clever devil.” That’s the name of the game, baby.

Rick Johnson
Hierophant
1971

Rick Johnsson captured the imaginations of magicians with the essay you just read. In the ensuing forty years since its first publication, many magicians have come to accept the words as truth. But not Tom Stone. In this biting but balanced counter-attack, Stone takes issue not only with the proposed solution, but also with the very analysis of the problems Rick Johnsson attempted to solve.

TOO PERFECT, IMPERFECT

BY TOM STONE

"SOME TRICKS, BY VIRTUE OF THEIR PERFECTION, BECOME IMPERFECT. CONVERSELY, SOME TRICKS BY VIRTUE OF THEIR IMPERFECTION, BECOME PERFECT."

-RICK JOHNSON

When, about twenty-five years ago, I heard of the Too Perfect Theory, I thought the idea – that some magical effects can be so perfect, so impossible, that they allowed no conceivable explanation to an audience but their actual method – was beautiful, and the way in which it was formulated gave me one of those *Aha!* Feelings. I fell immediately in love with it.

Through the years, though, I've begun to suspect the merits of the theory aren't as great as I had initially thought. To start with, it's impossible to use the theory to predict the success of an effect; and because of this, the value of the theory is limited. The theory says its secrets concern only *some tricks*, but it doesn't define how those tricks can be recognized. So, in practice, you have to perform a trick first, judge it by the reactions it receives, then decide if the trick belongs in the some tricks category the theory is describing. Some tricks work beautifully, even when

they seem utterly impossible. And some tricks do not. A good theory should make it easier to predict if the trick will be received in the manner hoped. The Too Perfect Theory fails to do that.

The Too Perfect Theory claims an effect that is “too perfect” must be made less so to become deceptive. But how do you decide how much “less perfect” an effect must be to succeed? How do you know when you have gone too far or not far enough, or when you have achieved just the right amount of imperfection? In the word project are the implicit ideas of comparison and degree, but if there is no definition in the context of a magic effect of the “right degree” of perfection, it is pointless even to use the word. If I said, “The size of my shoes is perfect,” this can’t be viewed as a universal statement unless everyone has feet the same size as mine. So, to use the concept of *perfect*, you need to define an agreed measure with which you can judge the “degree of perfection.”

This is the reason why both supporters and opponents of the Too Perfect Theory have a difficult time proving their positions. Both sides have proofs to support their stances, but not enough proofs to convince the other side. Rick Johnsson formulated the theory in print in 1970, and in the ensuing forty years, neither side has succeeded in coming any closer to achieving a convincing conclusion, even though some great thinkers have expertly argued pro and contra. I suspect this is due to the theory being neither right nor wrong. Instead, there might be another explanation, one previously unexplored; and I believe an application of Occam’s Razor might support this assumption. In *The Books of Wonder, Volume II*, Tommy Wonder divides the Too Perfect Theory into two parts: an analysis and a suggested solution. He sees no problem in the analysis, but refuses to

accept the solution the analysis suggests, because he considers that solution as detrimental to his art.

But if you assume the analysis correct, you should have no choice but to follow the solution given by the theory. Even though this isn't a proof of a flawed theory, I view it as a signpost to the location of the problem; that is, if the theory is flawed, it is in the form of the analysis it demands. A good analysis should provide a useful solution, one that an artist of even the highest caliber, like Tommy Wonder, would accept. The only thing I can imagine that would explain why both supporters and opponents of the theory have found enough proofs to maintain their positions, and at the same time would explain why the phrase "some tricks" remains undefined, is that the theory is incomplete. And because of its incompleteness, the Too Perfect Theory becomes invalid in both its analysis and its suggested solution.

But how is its analysis invalid? In many cases, the "proofs" of "too perfect" an effect are simply misunderstandings of basic magic concepts.

In every trick, at some point there is a deception that causes the audience to assume that something false is true. That "truth" is an illusion, because reality is different. That is, there is a fork in the path of perceived events.

For example, you might create the illusion that a selected card is inserted into the middle of the deck—but in reality it remains on top. When we make these two different perceptions merge, we get an effect: When the top card is shown to be the selection, it appears to have risen magically from the center. What is interesting here is that it is at the point when the two perceptions

are superimposed that the audience assumes the trick happened, even though the actual deception occurred long before.

We magicians are not immune to this process. Let's say that our deception fails; it is not as convincing as we would like. In such cases we do not get the superimposition of perceived realities for which we are aiming. Since the spectators don't know what the illusion was meant to be, they will not protest and will reluctantly follow along—but they will find their own paths; paths that might in part approach reality and in part approach the intended illusion. But we don't find this out until we reach the effect, the point where the reality and the intended illusion are merged. And it is at that point, due to the lack of response, that we learn we have a problem – and since we notice the problem at the point of the effect, it is easy to believe it is at that point a solution has to be applied.

The following example of a burnt-and-restored bill effect is sometimes claimed as too perfect. A bill is borrowed. It is then openly burnt to ashes. A spectator lowers a box from the ceiling and opens it—and inside is the borrowed bill.

Of course, the spectator will immediately believe the bill is a duplicate. Not because the effect is “too perfect,” but because the bill didn't vanish to begin with. To destroy something is not the same thing as vanishing it!

Think about it. Translating it to a card effect may make it easier to comprehend. A spectator signs a selected card. It is torn apart and the pieces are dropped to the table. The magician brings out his wallet, opens it and removes the selected card restored. But

the spectator still sees the torn pieces on the table, so he must reasonably assume the card in the wallet is a duplicate.

Destruction is not a magical effect. Some magicians claim they achieve a stronger effect when they make the conditions “less perfect” by putting the bill into an envelope before they burn it. But that is incorrect, because to destroy the bill in full view is not an effect. However, when the bill is put into an envelope, the perceived effect is that the bill vanishes gradually while the envelope burns.

From this we can see that burning the bill in full view is not perfect at all, because it isn't even an effect. Putting the bill into an envelope might seem to a magician less impossible, but it is in fact a huge improvement, because the magician is perceived to have made the bill vanish—a magical effect—rather than to have destroyed it—an act anyone is capable of and understands. Now, if one could find a way of burning the bill without leaving behind any ashes, perhaps one could burn it in full view and still create the effect of a vanish. Maybe the borrowed bill could be switched for a flash bill—or...

The perceived magical effect might be altered from a transposition to that of a restoration—something along these lines: A bill is borrowed and signed, then burnt in full view. As the owner of the bill examines a lemon, the performer collects the ashes. He then rubs them against the lemon, making them disappear. And when the lemon is cut open, the restored signed bill is found inside. The general method needn't be changed, but the effect is constructed to avoid confusion between destruction and disappearance.

Let's take our analysis of the Burnt and Restored Bill further. Magicians commonly perform this effect by putting the bill into an envelope. The envelope is burnt, then the performer brings

a wallet from his pocket and produces the bill from it. This presentation elicits a good reaction.

Now let's say our magician decides to improve the effect by making the bill reappear in a box hanging from the ceiling. But when he tries this he's surprised to find the audience no longer accepts the effect. Instead they suspect that the bill produced is a duplicate.

In trying to analyze why this has occurred, he applies the Too Perfect Theory and concludes that his improvement made the effect too unbelievable. But the analysis the Too Perfect Theory provides examines only the part of the effect that has been improved, and doesn't hint in the slightest that the problem might lie elsewhere. And because of this, the Too Perfect Theory, as a diagnostic tool, is incomplete, and every "solution" it offers will also be incomplete—or flawed—or dead wrong.

A complete theory would take into account the whole effect, not just the "perfected" part. And a complete theory would ask. "In comparison to what is the problematic part too perfect?"

I strongly suspect there is a larger theory, and the current Too Perfect Theory is only a part of that greater whole. Unfortunately, I don't know what that larger theory might be but I believe it would include the concept of balance within an effect.

Why did our magician's effect fail when he made the burnt bill reappear in a suspended box? Why did it raise suspicions of a duplicate? The answer is that the reappearance of the bill is "too perfect" when compared to the initial vanish. There is an imbalance in the effect because the vanish is not deceptive enough to support such an impossible reappearance. But the current incomplete theory only suggests we make the climax less impossible. A complete theory would recommend that we

make the ending less impossible, or make the beginning more impossible, or adjust both beginning and end to equalize their levels of impossibility.

Perhaps people looking at the burnt-bill-in-box effect aren't taken in completely by the initial deception and, instead of following the intended illusion, think, "Ah, the bill has vanished! He must have managed to sneak it out of the envelope without me seeing it. Give me a few minutes and I'll figure out how he did it. The bill is probably in his pocket."

Then the box is lowered from the ceiling and the bill is shown inside. The spectators who still suspect the bill ended up in the performer's pocket instantly conclude that the bill in the box must be a duplicate.

The solution provided by the current theory is to make the reappearance less impossible by having the bill appear inside a wallet, which is in the inside pocket of the magician's jacket. Spectators who suspect the bill was sneaked to a pocket will now believe the bill in the wallet is the same one apparently burnt – and that the magician is extremely skilled in being able to slip it into the wallet without being seen.

But because the Too Perfect Theory is incomplete, it gives no indication that the solution is a question of balance, and that an alternative answer exists: Make the beginning as impossible as the ending.

If spectators don't have a clue of where the bill went, and are unable to conceive of a solution, the reappearance of the bill inside a box hanging from the ceiling will have a strong effect. People will think, "Wait a minute. What happened? The bill vanished! Did he sneak it into his pocket? No, he didn't even touch the bill. Is that guy from the audience a stooge? No, he

looks just as surprised as me – and no one is that good an actor. I have no idea where the bill went and it doesn't matter how long I think about it, I'll never have a clue. Wait! Now the bill is inside that box! Well, that place is just as impossible as any other."

This analysis, I believe, provides the solution to Tommy Wonder's problem with his "Watch in Nest of Boxes". Tommy never changed the method he used for vanishing the borrowed watch, a method that follows a centuries-old tradition: smashing the watch while it is inside a cloth bag. And this method does not seem impossible enough to support his extraordinary production of the watch from a nest of boxes. The reappearance isn't "too perfect." Instead, the vanish isn't "perfect enough." A complete theory would have told Tommy, "The reappearance is too impossible *when compared* to the vanish. The solution is either to make the ending less impossible or to find a better disappearance for the watch."

Another Tommy Wonder piece offers a further indication that the Too Perfect Theory is incomplete. That piece is his masterful version of the "Grapefruit, Lemon, Egg and Canary." In this routine a bird, an egg and a lemon are vanished and reappear in an impossible place: The bird reappears inside the egg, which reappears inside the lemon, which reappears inside the grapefruit.

If Rick Johnson's theory were complete, it would be impossible for Tommy to get a good reaction with this routine, because each reappearance is, according to the Too Perfect Theory, simply too good to be true.

However, the routine works beautifully just as it is, and draws a huge response from audiences. And that is only because—as a more complete theory would have predicted—each vanish

is strong enough to support the impossible ending. This is a routine with internal balance.

The great thinker, Arturo de Ascanio, applied the principle of balance in effect, with a tighter focus, in his theory of Degrees of Freedom. Ascanio observed that when a playing card is chosen and returned to the deck, the freedom of the selection should equal the freedom of its return. If the magician ribbon spreads the deck and has someone pick any card, then gathers the deck and demands that the card be replaced in the middle, just where he has cut, the combination of these procedures arouses suspicion, because the selection was utterly free while its return was seriously restricted.. To eliminate suspicion, the freedom of selection and return must be made, at least outwardly. Ascanio's Theory of Degrees of Freedom is a special case in our larger theory of comparison and balance in an effect.

When we add these two concepts to the Too Perfect Theory, it becomes more complete and useful. However, this is just another piece in the puzzle of formulating a larger theory of magical effectiveness. Someday perhaps someone will do for this theory what Einstein did for physics, seeing a greater part of the whole, where others before had found only pretty fragments. I am certainly not magic's Einstein, but I hope one day to meet him!

Tom Stone
Nordisk Magi
2000

TOM STONE

Sweden's Tom Stone is a deeply passionate, artistic performer. His work is a mixture of classical effects with practical methods and whimsical new plots with methods as outrageous as the effects they serve.



Eugene Burger begins the next piece with a meditation on the merits of magic theory in general—a topic quite appropriate for this collection. But it takes a surprise turn halfway through, when he uses the same logic to analyze the magic effect. And it boils down to this: not every moment of a magic effect must contain magic, but every single moment must be fascinating.

ON THE STRUCTURE OF MAGIC EFFECTS

BY EUGENE BURGER

I have always found the distinction we typically make between theory and practice rather curious. Is it really a valid distinction? Are these two things so very separate and unrelated? If so, in what sense?

One can certainly theorize about magic from one's armchair without ever putting one's theories into practice. But does the opposite ever hold? Is there ever practice without some kind of theory behind it? In other words, does one ever present a magic performance without *some understanding* of what he or she is doing? Even if one's understanding is garbled and confused, isn't there always some sense of understanding undergirding our actions? If there is, the issue isn't whether one should indulge in theories or be free of theories, but rather which theories are best to help us reach our goals.

Here is a theory for you to consider. Let me put it very simply. It appears to me that magical effects, whether close-up card tricks or grand illusions, exhibit much the same general structure in performance. First, I want to explain what I take this structure to be. Second, I will draw two implications. I think that if we understand these implications and take them seriously – which

means, of course, putting them into practice; to *act* upon them – our magical performances might indeed be greatly improved. Think of any magic effect that you enjoy performing. For the sake of analysis, imagine that we can divide this effect into *a series of discrete moments* leading to a final moment of magic. We can look at most magic effects in this way.

We do this all the time in almost all areas of our lives. We divide things up; we separate things and distinguish between them. Yet we must be cautious here. This is, after all, an act of the imagination! Being a bit cautious, then, I would add a qualification. When we do this division in thought, when we divide any magic effect into separate moments for analysis, this activity always has an artificial quality for two reasons.

First, because all such division is ultimately arbitrary and based upon the views and values of the one who is doing the dividing; I might divide the effect into six moments and you might choose seven – and others might find five or nine. The fact is that we might all want to enjoy the same pie but some of us might have very different ideas on how to slice it up.

The second reason that such divisions are artificial is because, at its best *in performance*, a magical effect is much more than a series of discrete moments. It is *a flowing movement*. The better the performance, the more seamless the movement, the choreography. For the speaking performer, of course, this involves both the choreography of our actions and the choreography of our speech, aiming at a marriage of our words and actions so they happily work together.

Even admitting this qualification, the fact is that the human mind loves (and very often profits from) this dividing activity and

so, *in thought and imagination*, we can and do split the seamless movement of a piece of magic into discrete moments.

Here is an example. Consider one of my favorite stage illusions, Siegfried and Roy's Marvelous transformation of Lynette Chappell into a tiger. We might divide this into the following discrete moments:

- The glass box is lowered containing Lynette.
- The box is covered with a cloth.
- Roy dramatically pulls the cloth from the box revealing the tiger.

Now consider one of my favorite close-up card effects, Matt Schulien's Card in the Matchbook. It might be divided as follow:
A Card is selected.

- The card is returned to the deck.
- The card is (secretly) brought to the top.
- The card is (secretly) palmed off.
- The spectator shuffles the cards.
- The card is (secretly) folded
- The card is (secretly) loaded into the matchbook.
- The audience discovers the card in the matchbook.

Needless to say, since the pie can be cut in several different ways, one could certainly make more (or fewer) divisions than the seven I have suggested. One might, for instance, not include those moments in which the performer is doing something secretly, especially if one were dividing the effect from the audience's perception. From the performer's perspective however, such moments are critically important. Alternatively, one might add (after moment 7 above) another moment in which the audience

first discovers the selected card is not in the deck. After this discovery, the card is then found in the matchbook.

However many discrete moments you conceive, however, I think that each discrete moment must exhibit at least one common feature: each moment must be experienced by the audience as being fair and above board. *No moment must arouse suspicion.*

A common structure of magical effects thereby emerges. Regarding each moment in a magic effect, the audience says, "Yes, that was fair." "Yes, that was fair." "Yes, that was fair." And then the moment of magic occurs and the audience says, "Wow! What happened here?"

Thus, I would say that the general structure of most magical effects can be put as follows: Fair / Fair / Fair / Fair / Wow!

From this rather simple analysis, two implications may be drawn for our own magical performances. First, for the final moment of magic to create real impact on our audiences, *every* previous moment in the magic effect must meet the standard of "Yes, that was fair." If any moment fails to meet this standard, the magical *effect* is diluted or even destroyed.

Take the Schulien Card in the Matchbook as an example. What happens to the magical *effect* if I raise the suspicion in the audience as I execute my card control? I want to execute a pass, for instance, but members of my audience notice a weird jiggle of the cards as I am holding them. They know that I did *something* even if they don't know exactly what I did. In such a situation, I think it is rather obvious that the final effect of *magic* will be thereby diluted.

Again, what if I flash when attempting to palm the card? Again, isn't the final moment of magic diluted? Perhaps even destroyed? In the same way, when attempting to secretly fold the card, what happens if the audience notices that my right hand, below the edge of the table, is quite clearly *doing something*? Again, if we're honest, don't we need to admit that the final impact of my performance will be dramatically weakened?

So, the first implication of my analysis tells us that no moment in a magic effect must arouse suspicion; every moment must be perceived as being fair and above board.

How can I apply this theory to my practice of magic? Very simply. I can apply it by examining every moment in each of my magic presentations to see if every moment *really is deceptive*. In other words, we need to discover for ourselves if our performance *in each moment* really appears *fair* to our audiences. We must look at each moment and honestly ask ourselves if we are raising any suspicion – or if we are only fooling ourselves.

Too often we see magical performances in which little attention was paid to the early moments in the effect. The performer seemed to think that if the final magical climax is amazing, the moments leading up to that climax do not need to be carefully considered and examined. Yet not to examine them is to present second-rate magic.

This leads to the second implication: not only must every moment of a magic effect be perceived as being fair, every moment leading up to the magical climax must be in focus so that the audience can later remember that each moment was fair and above suspicion.

Perhaps the best way to keep the effect in focus is to treat each moment as an *important* moment. What is important commands my attention. If I perceive something before me as important, I willingly *give* it my attention. In a magic performance, though some moments may be more critical than others, no moment really is unimportant. Every moment needs to be given a sense of importance so that our audience never loses focus – and the effect’s impact is not lessened.

This means that we need to evaluate our magical work not only in regard to its deceptiveness; we must also evaluate it in terms of the sense of importance we are able to create with each moment of our performance. By its very definition, an act of *magic* is special; it is already important! Without *preserving* this sense that what we are doing is special and important, we may be presenting stunts but we are not presenting magic.

Eugene Burger
Mystery School
2003

PART FIVE



METHOD

"A MAGIC PERFORMANCE CONSISTS OF A COLLECTION OF TINY LIES, IN WORDS AND DEEDS, THAT ARE STACKED AND ARRANGED INGENUOUSLY TO FORM THE BATTLEMENT FOR AN ILLUSION."

-JIM STEINMEYER

Part of completely understanding what something is begins with defining what something is not. Jamy Ian Swiss begins our “method” conversation with a warning: the method is not the trick. The method should be considered when choosing material, but it cannot be the only consideration, and it should not be prioritized above the effect.

THE METHOD IS NOT THE TRICK

BY JAMY IAN SWISS

“The Egg Bag and the Linking Rings are classic tricks that combine a mechanical method with sleight-of-hand, and invariably the best performances are those in which the sleight-of-hand is superior (and the psychological requirements are well understood). Inferior versions quickly reveal their weaknesses when the performer fails to master the sleight-of-hand (and perhaps the psychology as well) and relies too heavily on the mechanical method. This is a common failing that can be found in all branches of magic, from conjuring to illusions to mentalism—whenever a practitioner makes the deadly mistake of thinking that the method is the trick. In fact, the method is part of the foundation—albeit a significant part—on which a mystery must be carefully constructed. But mystery is a delicate thing, and most methods, in and of themselves, are far too coarse to rely on in creating such a demanding and fragile composition as a thoroughly magical experience.”

—Jamy Ian Swiss, “Gaffs versus Skill,” *Antinomy*, No. 1

When we begin in magic, we are fascinated by method. Although possessed of a budding desire to share the experience of magic with others, at first we do magic primarily for ourselves, to satisfy our desire for power and control, and to fulfill our appetite for secret knowledge. Eventually, if we are fortunate, we learn to serve the audience's needs as a way to serve our own, transcending our self-absorption and transforming the use of magic as a bludgeon into the use of magic as a gift of experience.

But that will come later—if at all. First, there is the method. Titillated by the ability to surmount the barriers of secrecy, thrilled by first glimpses of the inner workings of conjuring, we hunger for more and more methods, and rarely are we satiated for long. The video age has better enabled method gluttony than any other, and our numbers are bloated by the methodologically obese, filled to bursting with the useless fat of couch-potato feasting, with little performance muscle developed by the slimming and toning regiment of practice and mastery.

To be sure, the study of method is a necessity, but it is an appetite that, like most, must be balanced with other fare, and tempered with actual technical skills. Knowledge and mastery of method are two vastly different things, and knowing a method makes you a magician as much as reading a medical book makes you a surgeon. Knowledge of theory, the study of performance elements including stagecraft, presentation skills, scriptwriting, and the like, are all further requirements of the conjuring art. But even these important elements combined will fail if certain critical needs are not met; namely, misdirection and the psychology of magic. Without this total menu, one can never grow to become the complete conjuror.

Why? Because the method is not the trick.

If you think this deceptively simple point is obvious, ask yourself this: Why, time and time again, are we faced with magicians who operate as if the method is indeed the trick?

Let's begin by considering the typical illusion act, in which loud music is played, a box is wheeled out, a woman is put into it, she is apparently perforated, divided, or disassembled in some manner, then quickly restored; the box is wheeled off, another vapid noise is heard over the sound system, and the next box is wheeled out.

Doubtless even in that blunt, if sadly too often accurate account, I have stepped beyond my stated point, and accordingly, I will ignore the lack of personality, point of view, intellect, and artistic content in these acts, in which the illusionist is little more distinctive a personality than his box-jumping accompanists. My primary concern here is method. Typically, what is the method of these box illusions? Far too frequently, off-the-shelf illusion acts repeatedly demonstrate a naive over-reliance on the wedge-base principle, in which a person is concealed in a base built to appear thinner than it actually is; too thin apparently to contain a human being.

Understand that the principle itself is not at fault; it is unarguably sound. The problem lies in the performer's blind faith in what is, by itself, a simplistic idea, the nature of which can rapidly become transparent to the observant, especially when repeated, and invariably when lacking accompanying aids to deception. A completely deceptive illusion is a delicate thing, composed of many parts.

As Jim Steinmeyer writes in *Hiding the Elephant*:

A magic performance consists of a collection of tiny lies, in words and deeds, that are stacked and arranged ingeniously

to form the battlement for an illusion. It's a delicate battle of wits—an audience that welcomes being deceived, then dares to be fooled, alternately questioning, prodding, and surrendering.

Methods tend to be simple things, and often simply crude. This becomes apparent if the methods are left bare and unassisted by skilled handling, presentation, performance, and above all, by psychological deftness. But the method is not the trick. If you wheel one wedge base out after another, in due course (and perhaps short order) you will be the only one in the theater who remains deceived.

These elements of handling and presentation, and even misdirection, are still not the entire story; what, after all, is the Too Perfect Theory, if not an approach to assuring that the actual method is not laid bare to the audiences view and eventual discovery? We cancel methods (as Daryl called the concept), or to use another term, we apply Juan Tamariz's Theory of False Solutions, because we recognize that the method is not the trick, and if the actual method is all we leave for the audience to examine, some will doggedly follow that path until they reach that method—whereupon the illusion dies in their eyes.

In the golden age of illusion invention, and even up to the last performing days of the likes of Dante and Harry Blackstone, Sr., illusions were actually performed, not demonstrated as is so often the case today. The great illusionists were men possessed of conjuring training and skill and expertise, possessed of personalities and points of view; and all these elements were thoroughly displayed and exploited in their performances. Today we know that if you perform small magic on platforms and stages — what used to be called parlor or nightclub magic—the performer must have a personality and a point of view. (I do not suggest that all such performers are actually so equipped, but we do know that something that passes for a personality

must be present, lest the Egg Bag be left to its own devices.) But somehow, illusionists—and, it seems, those who regularly book them for magic conventions—appear to operate under the assumption that they do not require these elements. They need only possess the box, a reasonably flexible young girl, and some third-rate pop music—for which they probably haven't paid the rights.

Absent these elements of a complete performance, there is nothing left on stage but the method—and that simply isn't enough. The audience is left in a little game of hide and seek. She hides, the audience seeks, and where exactly is she now in that box? But no one thinks she is actually gone, much less penetrated or disassembled. No one is deceived—save the magician once more, for thinking his illusion a success.

Many factors have led to this dismal state of the art for large illusions. Portability, the lack of bad angles, and other concerns of practicality make these illusions appealing to the working act. But pragmatism can be the enemy of art, as Tommy Wonder so efficiently proves in his essay, "Practical Thinking." Another factor, I suspect, is that, in the past, magicians tended to graduate through the ranks of conjuring, eventually reaching illusion work. Today a remarkable number of young magicians are jamming their girlfriends into the cramped confines of their first Thin Sawing, before learning the fundamental principles of conjuring. And it would appear some illusion builders are as innocent of such knowledge as those utilizing their wares. Some are not even aware of how to construct a convincing wedge base, much less install the subtle details—visible, concealed, and mechanical—of the long-abused Harbin Zig-Zag Girl. Unarguably one of the greatest illusions ever invented, the trick as seen today is a pale shadow of Harbin's original. Harbin invited an audience member up to witness the action, as if it were a close-up trick, and he talked to the audience at length,

in his engaging and entertaining manner. Harbin's approach to performing his invention was a quintessential example of what John Thompson calls "talking away the box," which is arguably the single most important requirement of any effective illusion performance.

Countless modern illusions—blades, tubes and rods penetrating a lady—are failed attempts to vary Harbin's Zig-Zag by only varying the weapons; i.e., the blades become metal tubes in the shapes of Brobdingnagian cookie cutters. Each variant drifts further and further from the point of origin, until the beauty, the magic, the deceptiveness—the illusion—of Harbin's original is as absent from the proceedings as its inventor.

This may sound like a clarion call to bring back the old days, but consider the alternatives. How many wedge bases did we see in Lance Burton's show? Among the most prominent illusionists of our time, Lance mixed and matched the time-honored methods of illusion technology—mirrors and traps and other forms of human concealment—canceling methods as would an expert manipulator, and never leaving a defenseless box on stage for the audience to ponder at length. Always there is misdirection and production and personality and variety to steer the spectators off the track—and I don't recall any wedges the last time I saw the show. Illusionists would do well to consider why—and the advantages of being able to build a show into your own theater are not the only reasons.

But let us leave the beleaguered illusionist, for he is not our actual target—he is but a convenient example of a ubiquitous problem. Almost anywhere we look in magic, certainly in the magic contest and the magic convention show, we can find unadorned methods, left naked before the coldblooded, unblinking eyes and minds of the audience.

And so we move from macro to micro: What is the method of the French Drop? To pretend to transfer a small object from one hand to another, while actually retaining it in the original hand? Not really. That is the goal of a correctly executed French Drop. But the method involves the fingers beneath the displayed coin lowering themselves infinitesimally, just sufficiently, to allow the coin to drop back into the hand. (An inferior but commonplace alternative, more prone to flashing, is to raise the thumb that supports the top of the coin, to allow the coin to drop to the fingers.)

Sleight-of-hand conjurors would never claim that this tiny bit of mechanics, which enables the coin to drop out of the way, and the taking hand to feign grasping it, comprises the entire method of the French Drop. Effective execution of the sleight depends on many small movements of the body, designed to make the contrived action of the transfer believable. Michael Close has pointed out that the very notion of transferring an object from one hand to another occurs rarely in real life. (When we pick out some coins before we insert them into a vending machine or hand them to a cashier is one exception.) Therefore, the action is prone to suspicion from the start, and we must use every weapon in our arsenal to render it convincing and deceptive. And so, we must precisely time the transfer, dealing with the difficult challenge of mastering simulation. We must simulate the initial holding hand subsequently pretending to be an empty hand while it conceals the coin; and we must make the taking hand, actually empty, appear to be holding a coin. We should provide further support by simulating additional body language, by shifting the weight of the entire body from the left leg (if the left hand begins by displaying the coin) to the right leg (assuming the right hand is apparently taking the coin). This is accomplished by alternately locking the knee of the weight-bearing leg and slightly bending the knee of the weightless leg. We must also appear to transfer tension between the hands.

As the coin is transferred, the receiving hand becomes tense (communicated by a stiffened wrist), and the relinquishing hand, now supposed empty, becomes relaxed (communicated by a “broken” wrist. And in addition to this, we must direct the audience’s attention when and where we wish. As with almost any false transfer, we would look at the displayed coin first, then glance up at the audience during the false transfer, then look down at the imaginary coin (or “intended” coin, to use A1 Schneider’s useful term of “intention of reality”) apparently being held in the new hand. With these many subtle gestures and more, we provide focus and “point” with our body and our attention, instead of with the obvious pointing forefinger of the concealing hand. In sum, we transfer everything but the coin—including focus, weight, and tension.

Effective, experienced sleight-of-hand magicians invariably build these actions into their sleight-of-hand maneuvers, whether consciously as part of a deliberate theoretical and technical approach, or unconsciously, by design of experience. Without these complex support mechanisms, the tiny mechanical action of dropping the coin to the fingers—the method of the French Drop—would never fool anyone. Yet, as the scale of the trick grows, magicians can lose sight of these requirements. The shell, for example, may be the method of the Multiplying Billiard Balls. But when a beginner relies too directly on the use of the shell, it quickly becomes apparent to the audience that something is not right with the props. Somehow, the spectators are aware they are not being permitted to see everything. Somehow, those balls are collapsing into one another in some mechanical fashion.

What makes the Multiplying Billiard Balls deceptive is the total complement of sleight-of-hand skills, including vanishes other than those provided directly by the shell, concealed transfers, steals, simulation skills, body language, and misdirection. The

half shell is the method—and an ingenious and powerful one at that. But it is not the trick.

Consider the Zombie gimmick, a piece of stiff wire. As Tommy Wonder has written:

The gimmick isn't the secret to the illusion. It is only there to keep the ball from falling. But the illusion is the levitation of the ball, and the gimmick no more makes the ball float than gasoline drives one's car. The illusion of levitation is created purely by psychology, handling and acting.

Tricks built on combining a gaffed principle and sleight-of-hand can often be the most confusing to magicians, especially to beginners, who become overly dependent on the gaff, at the expense of the illusion. Tricks like the Egg Bag and Linking Rings, expertly done, are actually sleight-of-hand tricks that incorporate a gaff. They are not merely gaffed tricks that can be improved by the addition of some sleight-of-hand at the performer's option.

The decline of much small apparatus magic was, I suspect, partly due to magicians' over-confidence in and abuse of mechanical methods. A book like *Great Tricks Revisited* by Robert Parrish serves to remind us what marvelous effects can be achieved with small apparatus tricks like the Nest of Boxes, the Die Box, the Clock Dial, and others, when a talented and creative conjuror with an eye for detail applies all the support elements necessary for creating a deceptive illusion. (And in Mr. Parrish's case at least, engaging and entertaining ones as well.) The demise of so much small apparatus magic, and the relegating of such tricks to the children's birthday party circuit, was doubtless due to cultural reasons, and to the audience's increasing intolerance for contrived apparatus, much of it devised in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Nevertheless, I cannot help but suspect that poor

execution by amateur conjurors, who depended entirely on a simple gimmick rather than constructing a complete and careful illusion, also helped seal the fate of such devices. And while we are theorizing, I will suggest that sophisticated conjurors do not condescend toward kid-show magicians because they perform for kids; they condescend because too often—though by no means always—such performers know little about conjuring and tend to rely entirely, and crudely, on gaffed apparatus. Of course, the same disdain is held for those working hacks who perform for adults by relying on self-working tricks and trite gags, all of which can pay the rent but offer no artistic dividends.

Speaking of this breed, let us consider the species' favorite trick: the Invisible Deck. By this title I do not refer simply to the method of the Ultra Mental Deck, but rather to the classic Eddie Fields presentation, popularized and marketed by Don Alan. Use of the Invisible Deck presentation does not in and of itself make one a hack—although it probably puts you in the running. There are those rare performers who have added something of themselves to the premise. (Bill Malone comes to mind.) But have you ever noticed, as my friend Eric Mead pointed out to me, that when a hack performer includes the Invisible Deck in his act, it is invariably his best trick? Why is that? His having few if any other ideas might admittedly contribute, but that's not the main reason. The main reason is that, unlike most tricks, the Invisible Deck comes complete! The Invisible Deck has it all: presentation, misdirection, the elements that create illusion. Not only does it begin with a superbly deceptive method, but the hack will find it all but impossible to present the method as the trick. Rather, the routine comes complete with its own misdirection, psychology, and presentation. By the time you take the audience through all the rigmarole of handling the imaginary pack, you are building strong misdirective barriers to the notion that the deception relies simply and entirely on a gaffed deck of cards. You are entertaining the audience with the

process of the trick, rather than merely slogging through for an eventual payoff.

Of course, nothing is foolproof, because fools can be very determined. There are those who will have a spectator name a card, and then promptly show it reversed in the pack.

But one needn't be a working hack or an outright tyro to mistake a method for a trick. Increasingly, I see instances in which an experienced magician changes or expands into a new field: a manipulator goes mentalist, a close-up performer turns illusionist. In such cases, those whose work possesses a strong theoretical underpinning will generally fare better, as these are the practitioners with an abstract insight into the real ingredients of their craft. But many performers—even some of the best—reach their accomplishments more intuitively, and when the time for a radical change of material comes, this lack of theory can fail them badly. For example, a performer who understands the requirements of an entertaining bit of talking conjuring, when he elects to attempt a silent illusion, may overlook the demanding challenges he faces when handling a heavy and complex mechanical device as if it were a simple board or an unbroken hoop. Instead of creating the illusion of it being light, he looks like he is assembling a piece of industrial machinery—because, in fact, he is. Illusions are difficult to perform well, which is why they rarely are. It is intimidating to stand there, sweating in your costume, balancing your assistant, who is bound into a steel and leather harness, trying to insert a pin into a hole that will result in a pressure point of thousands of pounds per square inch—and somehow create the illusion of delicacy, much less weightlessness. Consider the difference between Robert-Houdin's original suspension—apparently a precarious experiment in balance, enhanced by the supposed effects of ether—and the typical Broomstick Suspension, an

apparent exposition on the principle of the lever. Truly, the method is not the trick!

Or imagine our silent manipulator turned mentalist, armed with a book test and a list of memorized words. The spectator need only open the book and think of a word, and mind reading ensues. Or does it? What if the spectator chooses the wrong word—shall we blame the helper, or consider the possibility that mentalism, as with any conjuring feat requiring audience instruction, depends on precise and effective language, and highly developed skills in audience management. The challenge with all mentalism is that of procedure. To create the illusion of mind reading, the performance should appear procedureless. Of course, this is not literally possible, for to obtain or control the flow of information secretly, procedure is necessary. The requirement is — to invoke John Thompson's illusion dictum—that we must talk away the procedure! But far too often, mentalism sinks into a bog of procedure, in which the effect is barely discernible, or is simply not worth the wait. And what of that book test? Here, you must talk away the book, or the audience will attribute the entire effect to the prop like the illusionist's box—rather than to the performer. But when was the last time you saw the book talked away rather than watching the performer march forward, with blithe and foolish confidence in mere method alone?

The lesson? Changing specialties, no matter what your experience, makes you a beginner again. Experienced performers find this difficult to believe, and stride forth in mistaken confidence without doing their homework. Methods need a great deal of help; no method can create an illusion on its own. Magical effects are fragile things, and as has oft been mouthed but too little understood, magic happens not in actuality but in the spectator's mind. Once again quoting *Hiding the Elephant*. When magicians are good at their jobs, it is because they anticipate the way the audience thinks— Great magicians don't

leave the audience's thought patterns to chance, they depend on the audiences bringing something to the table—preconceptions or assumptions that can be naturally exploited.

All these many steps require that the performer venture far beyond the hazardous confines of unadorned method, out into that complex and beautiful world of illusion. The method is not the trick.

Jamy Ian Swiss

Antinomy

2005

With Darwin Ortiz we delve deeper into the process of selecting a method. Jackson Pollock once wrote, "Method is, it seems to me, a natural outgrowth of need."

Here we look at specific pitfalls magicians fall into when evaluating methods. Chief among them: the misguided idea that making a method easier to perform is the same as simplifying the method.

PICKING THE BEST METHOD

BY DARWIN ORTIZ

A quick survey of Internet magic boards will show that a large percentage of posters are seeking the “best” version of a particular trick. (“Is the Balducci Levitation better than Zero Gravity?” “Can somebody recommend the best Card to Wallet?” “Which torn and restored card is better: the Reformation, The Restoration, The Reparation, The Renovation, or the Regurgitation?”)

We live at a time when there is a glut of methods, versions, and “improvements” for every magic plot. Consequently, it’s more important than ever to ask, not just which version is best, but how do we determine which version is best? (Life is simply too short to audience-test every possibility.) Before offering my own answer, I want to consider some of the most commonly used criteria.

CLEVERNESS

“A weak trick remains a weak trick, no matter how brilliant or devious the method.”

—Ken Weber, *Maximum Entertainment*

I remember once performing an effect for a prominent amateur magician. I didn’t expect the trick to fool him and it didn’t.

When I finished, he said enthusiastically, "That's a really clever method."

"And it's a really strong effect for lay people," I responded.

"But it's a really clever method," he said admiringly.

"And its a really strong effect," I said.

"But it's a really clever method," he retorted.

Admittedly, this is not Oscar Wilde/G.B. Shaw caliber repartee. But that's the point. The impasse in the conversation reflected the chasm between his perspective on magic and mine. For many magicians, methods develop a seductive quality. The method justifies the effect rather than the other way around. I've been to more than one magic lecture where the audience initially responded apathetically to a certain effect but fell in love with it when they learned the ingenious method.

Magicians love cleverness. That's why magic books are filled with diabolically clever effects that are worthless for entertaining lay audiences! Even something as appealing as cleverness is only a means, not an end in itself. The cleverest method is not always the best method. I recommend a utilitarian, rather than aesthetic, view of methodology. *The only thing that matters about a method is how impossible an effect it produces, not how good it makes you feel inside.*

CREATIVITY

Here is another seductive method pitfall. Creativity is rightly valued in magic (perhaps because it's so rare). Yet it too is only a means, not an end. What the cleverness crowd and the creativity crowd have in common is that they both admire method divorced

from effect. Methods need to be judged by their results, not by aesthetic qualities such as cleverness or creativity. All that matters is what the audience perceives.

Another field that values creativity is advertising. Yet, ad agencies never forget that their job is not to win Cleo awards but to sell dog food. Consequently, they have a saying in advertising: It's not creative unless it sells. In magic we should take the attitude: It's not creative unless it produces a strong effect.

If you aim to be the most effective magician you can be, I recommend that you avoid emotional attachments to methods. If a doctor falls in love with surgery, he may perform an operation when drugs or physical therapy might have worked better. The surgery might be fun for the doctor, but what about the patient?

DIFFICULTY

Emperor Joseph II: *Exactly. Very well put. Too many notes.*

Mozart: *I don't understand. There are just as many notes, Majesty, as are required. Neither more nor less.*

Emperor Joseph II: *My dear, young man, don't take it too hard. Your work is ingenious. It's quality work. And there are simply too many notes, that's all. Cut a few and it will be perfect.*

—Amadeus

Various legendary names in magic have been quoted to the effect that the way to improve a trick is to eliminate sleights. This is as ridiculous as a chef saying that the way to improve a recipe is to eliminate ingredients.

Of course, it would be equally ridiculous to claim that the way to improve a recipe is to add ingredients. The key to a good recipe is finding the right combination of ingredients. In the same way, the key to designing a strong effect is finding the right combination of sleights and/or gaffs and/or subtleties. In one case, that may be many sleights, in another it may be few or none. In one case it may be difficult sleights, in another it may be easy sleights.

Of course, if you can eliminate a sleight without impacting the effect in any way, you should certainly do it. In practice, this is almost never possible. In a magic effect, removing something almost always requires substituting something in its place. What you substitute may be more handling or simply a less convincing effect. The notion that you can remove a sleight and everything else remains the same is a fantasy.

The easier-is-better school often argues that easy methods allow the performer to concentrate on presentation. This claim is undercut by the fact that so many of its proponents are such lousy showmen. They'll stumble and fumble their way through a self-working trick so badly that you tremble to think what it might look like if they weren't "concentrating on presentation." I suspect that's because this argument is often an excuse for laziness. A lazy magician is no more likely to work on his presentation than on his technical skills.

Your ability to concentrate on presentation is a function of your mastery of the method, not the difficulty of the method. Of course, it takes more work to master a difficult routine. You shouldn't consider adding such a routine to your repertoire if you're not willing to do the work. Nevertheless, someone like Paul Gertner concentrates more on presentation while performing a technically demanding coin or Cups and Balls routine than most magicians do when performing self-working tricks.

As misguided as it is to say that the easier version is always better, this is only the flip side of the equally misguided view that the harder version is always better. This attitude is found among many card technicians, particularly young magicians in love with their own technical skills. I think of these two camps as the “old fart school” and the “young wise-ass school.” (I apologize to the many young and old who don’t fit these stereotypes.)

Either way, judging the merits of a routine by how many sleights it contains is like judging the merits of a sculpture by how much it weighs.

Darwin Ortiz
Designing Miracles
2006

Tommy Wonder's "The Three Pillars" is, to my thinking, one of the greatest passages ever written on magic. Tommy manages to take us through the thought process of developing a method for a trick. He points out three "pillars" of method: psychological, mechanical, and manipulation. Use just one or two and the trick risks being out of tune: a harmony of all three approaches will yield the strongest magic.

THE THREE PILLARS

BY TOMMY WONDER,
WITH STEPHEN MINCH

If I want to influence matter – say I would like to alter a piece of wood – what would I use? Of course I would not try to make such an alteration with my mind. In my mind I could try to change the shape of the wood, but it is improbable that any change would occur. No, using another material object would be better, a knife maybe; then I could carve the wood to the exact shape I desire.

Now, what if I wish to change your thoughts? Would I use a knife? Yes, by using a knife, I might be able to *appear* to change your thoughts. Governments have attempted to change the thoughts of their citizens by using such things as knives, guns, tanks. But did it really change the thoughts of the people? Or did those people just pretend their thoughts had changed while the threat was present? How much easier it is to change someone's thoughts by giving them *other thoughts*.

Matter and thoughts. To change each of them, you need the right tool. Use the wrong one and you are likely to have little, if any, success.

When we perform magic, what do we change? Is it something that people see or hear or smell, or is it what people *believe* they see, hear or smell? Are we not painting a picture of another reality, one that does not really exist, but only seems to exist? It is an impression. It is a supposition that people believe. It is a chimera. Magic only exists in their minds; it does not exist in reality.

If it can only exist in their minds, then are we not changing people's thoughts? And if magic consists of changing thoughts, then the tool we need, as magicians is obvious. Of course, we could proceed as do those obtuse governments who still haven't learned that one cannot change thoughts with matter. We could try to change our audiences' thoughts with material things, like props and gimmicks. We could be that misguided.

Our movements, too, are fundamentally material, although most of the time they tend to carry meaning and, therefore, are fed by thought and can change thoughts in others. However, gestures such as waving silk handkerchiefs in a presumably elegant fashion are actions that convey little thought. They are essentially material in nature.

To be truly successful as magicians, though, we must understand that magic is an art of the mind, and to achieve a genuine feeling of magic we must use our own minds to affect those of our audiences. There is no better or more efficient tool: thoughts to change thoughts. Psychology, then, is our main and primary method. It is the key pillar on which magic rests.

SO LET'S CHANGE THE THOUGHTS OF OUR AUDIENCES

Yes, let's change those thoughts by giving our spectators other thoughts. But how can I give an immaterial thing like a thought

to my audience? After all, they probably can't read my thoughts; so I must find a way to communicate the thoughts I wish. Now what media do we possess for that job?

Well, of course, I could use speech, the trembling of my vocal cords, which vibrate the air, which vibrations in turn are picked up by the eardrum, that gossamer membrane. Basically, speech is a physical form of communication that relies on the use of matter: the vocal cords, the air, the eardrum.

Or I could use paper and ink, like this book, to give my thoughts to you. Again matter is used to transport my thoughts into your brain. Or maybe I can convey my thoughts to you with body language: by the way I (a material thing) move; by my carriage; by the way I pose or shape it, so to speak, into a material sign, a sign that you can understand. Regardless whatever medium I use to give you my thought, it always involves some form of matter. Without the use of matter, conveying my thoughts to you isn't possible, apart from genuine mind reading.

So matter is always necessary in some way to make the conveyance of thoughts possible. We need matter to achieve the principle method behind the illusion of magic, to make possible the psychology, to express the desired thoughts. However, no matter what form of matter we use, it is there only to make possible the real method of magic: *thoughts to change thoughts*. That is the foremost consideration. Matter cannot be the method used to change thoughts. It can only *communicate* thoughts. It is only the vehicle for the thoughts that make the magic. Matter makes our one and only effective tool, the thought, concrete; something with which we can work. Matter makes our method, our tool practicable. That's all.

This concept is so childishly simple, so obvious, it is astonishing that some magicians harbor the delusion that they can make

magic in people's minds, change their thoughts, by the mere use of matter alone, through the unadorned use of props, gimmicks, movements, words or sleight-of-hand. It is amazing that some seem to think one can do magic without the use of thoughts, without psychology, without the mind. It is as irrational as trying to change people's thoughts by pointing a knife at them, or by giving them a new car or money or some other desirable commodity. You may scare or you may please by such primitive means, but you have little hope of achieving a change in the thoughts of the people involved.

However, I can hear you sputter and protest already. You might say, "If someone gives me a bag of gold, it would certainly make me happy, and therefore my thoughts *would* be influenced by mere matter. "Yes, a bag of gold indeed might make you happy, and it certainly might eliminate some of the problems you may have. But does it really alter your thoughts? Does it truly change your thinking, your beliefs, your set of values? A bag of gold in itself cannot change your thoughts. It can only do so if there is another thought behind it.

THE MATERIAL METHODS

The material side of methods, then, is a vehicle for our thoughts, the conduit for the real method of magic: psychology. But just what do we have in the way of material methods?

There are two things basically: manipulation and mechanics. Manipulation encompasses all the moves and sleights, and the ways we handle the props. With deceptive manipulation we can

paint false pictures of reality; a false representation of the facts concerning all the movements we make.

The mechanical side is also a false representation of facts: the double bottoms, special holders, gimmicks, fekes, etc.

Both things, manipulation and the mechanical, are equally effective in aiding psychology. Both methods are valid.

What do we use then? If we want to deceive our audiences we have a choice in what tools we use. Nonetheless, whatever the method employed, since all is obviously in the service of psychology, we cannot hope to deceive without it. It is the key pillar on which all our deceptions rest.

Deceiving by psychology alone is possible. The only material aid would likely be speech, the agitation of air. It is also feasible to deceive by psychology aided by manipulation. Or we could do it through psychology aided by mechanical means. Or we could enjoy the support of both manipulation and the mechanical. All four possibilities are valid and can work.

What if we were to use psychology alone? It might happen that we would meet someone who has a capacity for analyzing things of a psychological nature. This person, being adept in thinking about psychological matters, might see through our deception. It is unlikely, but it can happen.

However, if we combine psychology with mechanical methods, it becomes much harder to see through the deception, since our astute spectator must then not only see through our psychology, but must also possess an analytical capacity for things mechanical. The chance for deception becomes much greater, since many people are not equally gifted in both disciplines of thought. In addition, once someone starts analyzing an observed event

in a certain way, that person tends to persist in thinking along that line. To analyze both the psychological and mechanical one must mentally backtrack and reanalyze in a different way. In a sense the effect must be analyzed twice, once for each discipline. This seldom happens.

If you would make a combination, where the psychology is supported by both the mechanical and manipulation, then three different disciplines are in play. To see through three disciplines the effect has to be analyzed *three* times, and the spectator has to be versed in all three. Such triple analysis is extremely rare. It is logical, therefore, that a secret based on all three disciplines has the greatest chance of survival. In such circumstances our secret is well protected.

Those magicians unskilled in manipulation frequently forget it and use what we often miscall “self-working” magic. Here the sole support for the psychology is the mechanical. This charitably presumes that these magicians are even aware of the psychological aspect of their “self-working” trick. The only things they feel comfortable using are the mechanical methods. What a loss! They have thrown away such an important support. An invaluable cover for their secrets is totally ignored.

And some are just the opposite. They scorn the use of mechanics. Either out of some sort of false pride, or because they have no knowledge of the mechanical principles of magic. Or they distrust them, thinking mechanical apparatus always breaks down at show time (a nonsensical idea that we will return to shortly). These magicians, too, rashly discard one of the pillars on which magic rests.

Although magic can be done effectively while ignoring one of the pillars—as long as it is not that of psychology—it is a pity to

do so. It is throwing away something that can be used to great advantage.

Being weak or unknowledgeable in one or more of the three pillars of magic is not uncommon. If you are not well versed in psychology, however, you can stop right now. Magic will not be possible. For, as we have just discussed, how can you hope to change your audiences' thoughts without the use of other thoughts. So if one is not well versed in psychology, one must learn it or forget magic completely. Coin collecting is a pleasurable hobby too.

If you are not well versed in manipulation, and if you still have a good grasp on psychology, you have a fair chance to create a good piece of magic; nevertheless, learning the required sleights and movements would be far better. Your magic will be considerably improved by it. Otherwise you have severely limited your possibilities, and magic does not fare well under limitations.

The same concept applies to the mechanical side. If you don't know mechanical principles, they should be learned. Ignorance in this area again means limited methods at your disposal and your magic will suffer for it.

WHY USE MECHANICAL MAGIC?

Having raised the topic of mechanics, some special comment on this branch of methodology is necessary, since it has fallen widely into disfavor.

In some circumstances mechanical means can be more efficient than manipulation, and it is important not to lose sight of that fact. Otherwise, you cannot adopt the best method for the effect you wish to create. Nevertheless, mechanical methods have

become unpopular with many magicians. There are several reasons for this:

1) Because mechanical magic frequently seems self-working, it appeals to those magicians who don't wish to practice. They believe that the apparatus can do the work for them. Of course, this isn't so. Consequently, mechanical magic is often performed wretchedly. One can get the impression that something is wrong with mechanical magic, since it often appears that it can't be done with precision or artistry. This, however, is the responsibility of the performer, not of the mechanism employed.

2) Much mechanical magic looks suspicious: a box made to do a trick. It is obviously a piece of mechanical magic that works itself, and the audience thinks, "If I could buy that box I could do that trick as well."

3) Many magicians don't trust mechanical magic. "It works fine at home, but when you go to do a show, it breaks down. You can't depend on it."

Most times the problem that gives rise to this third criticism is that the apparatus has been badly or cheaply constructed. I have seen some apparatus so poorly made, it is a miracle that it works even once.

To build mechanical magic properly is usually expensive. If you use cheap materials or a cheaper but inferior design, the apparatus cannot be expected to work dependably or well. Take a car as an example. Even an inexpensive car relies on parts that must operate in a specific way hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of times. These parts do this because they have been properly designed and built, and are made of the right materials. Magic apparatus, to be good, must be built the same way. If you

build your magic like a Rolls Royce, or even a common Ford, there is no reason it should break down.

Developing and building good dependable mechanisms can be costly; and if you must rely on someone else to design and make these for you, it can be even more so. It takes skill, knowledge and time. Consequently, I have educated myself in mechanical principles, I've taken some classes in machine building, I've bought the necessary tools, taken the time to develop the skills required to fabricate the apparatus and gimmicks I need; and I build them myself in my own workshop, just as my predecessor, Fred Kaps, did. I would recommend that magicians serious in the use of mechanical principles do the same.

Good mechanical design generally uses as few moving parts as possible, because if something is to go wrong it most often happens with those parts. Also you must employ the best materials for your purposes.

Once you have done this, it is also necessary to test the apparatus; not fifty or a hundred times, but several hundred, and with extra strain on the unit to assure that it will stand up to performance conditions. This testing is very important, because it will reveal flaws in the design, and sometimes you will have to build it again to get it right. It can be a lot of work, but it is all part of the process of building good apparatus. If you do these things, and if you regularly give your apparatus the proper maintenance, you can place as much trust in it as you would in your well-rehearsed manipulative abilities.

It is important though to understand that when you use mechanism as a principle, it should not be an open use. This brings us back to the second criticism mentioned above. Obviously strange boxes and apparatus boast to the audience of their mechanical contrivance. The mechanism should be

hidden, secret, just as good psychology and sleight-of-hand are hidden and secret.

Contrary to common belief, apparatus that appears “normal” does not automatically escape suspicion, if the apparatus obviously performs the effect or does something to aid it. Giving fast rules for determining when this will occur is hard; but the mechanical principle has failed when the audience sees something inexplicable happen with a prop and thinks, “Oh, it’s just some mechanical thing that I don’t completely understand.” Just because the apparatus appears normal doesn’t guarantee that its function and use won’t cry out, “I’m gimmicked!”

If one hides mechanical apparatus so that it isn’t apparent, you can produce an effect that looks as magical as manipulation often looks. Indeed, mechanics can aid manipulation, making it more efficient and sometimes – though not always – easier. There are times when mechanics can increase the difficulty of performance, yet nevertheless improve the magical appearance of the effect. However, the important thing to understand is that mechanics are not necessarily used to make your job easier; they are simply a tool to be applied to achieve your goal in the best way possible. Sometimes they do just that; at other times another tool is better for the task.

I hope that now it is clear that, while mechanical methods are grossly underestimated by many of today’s magicians, the reasons for this unpopularity are based on misconceptions. I like mechanical apparatus and gimmicks, and as one of the three pillars of magic, I will not foolishly sacrifice such a powerful tool. Instead, I combine mechanics with psychology and manipulation to achieve the best illusion.

A good example of this is “The Ring, the Watch and the Wallet”, which is to a great extent mechanical. Yet, psychology and

manipulative handling are integral to the success of the effect. Consider just the vanish of the three objects from the envelope: The money is vanished through palming aided by mechanics (the mechanics eliminating the need for finger motion); the ring genuinely goes into the envelope; and the watch never goes in. So, each object is vanished in a different way, applying all three principles—psychology, manipulation and mechanics—at different times to achieve an astonishing effect.

This trick could not be done purely by mechanics or purely by manipulation or purely by psychology. It is these principles in combination, the Three Pillars of Magic, that make the deception so successful. When all three are employed with care and intelligence, the method behind the magic becomes entirely invisible, leaving only the mystery to be enjoyed.

Tommy Wonder

The Books of Wonder

1996

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Let's put theory into practice, as Pit Hartling explains a specific way in which we can use "accidental" mistakes, a bit of confusion, and presentation as a methodological tool.

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METHOD AND STYLE AND THE PERFORMING MODE

BY PIT HARTLING

In addition to the many different styles of presentation, there are also different styles of method. Over the last few decades, the technical repertoire of Card Magic evolved quite rapidly: Where only a century ago, performers had a more limited of number of moves and strategies at their disposal, we can now choose from literally thousands of sleights and principles to reach our magical goals. With this liberty comes the burden of choice. In magic, one effect can often be reached by a multitude of methods. Theorists have long been looking for criteria that would allow clearly saying which methods are “better” than others. Even though there might actually be a few such criteria, sooner or later, somebody will come along, break all the carefully established rules, do everything “wrong” and the result will be not only deceptive but also beautiful, artistic and highly individual.

There are two points to this: First, what might be a highly deceptive method for one performer might not fool a five-year old when done by somebody else. And second, the more experienced we become, the more we know and the more methods we assimilate, the more personal our choices will be and the more these choices will be part of whatever it is that constitutes our style. Given a certain minimum of artistic

experience, there is no “good” or “bad” anymore. “Right” and “wrong” have been replaced by “you” and “me.”

In practice, this can be seen constantly: How would you personally approach the effect of a shuffled deck being magically put into New-Deck order? Are you part of the deck switch-faction or do you consider yourself a member of the false shuffle-club? Or how about mind reading: Would you opt for a force followed by a clean divination? Or would you choose a higher degree of freedom of choice, followed by some fishing? Of course, these decisions may be influenced by many factors like performing situation, practicality, technical ability, etc. But ultimately, those choices will be the result of – and at the same time a constitutive element of – your own personal style.

That said I want to mention a certain methodological tool that might or might not fit your style. The concept is not mine; in fact I think nobody can claim having “invented” it and I am sure many of you are already using it to a certain degree without even realizing it. At least, this is what happened to me: Even though I had been using the strategy quite a bit, I was hardly aware of the fact (and certainly did not consider it a “concept”) until I came across an eye-opening article Rafael Benatar published in *MAGIC Magazine* in January 2001. As the psychological technique that Rafael described in his article is quite an important element of my performances I felt some of the descriptions in this booklet could be more deeply understood if this was explicitly addressed. So, with Rafael Benatar’s friendly permission, and under his excellent title, let me offer a few thoughts on:

The Performing Mode: In most silent performances of stage magic, almost every move the performer makes, every gesture and every gaze are seen as part of the performance. The “act” is just that: A carefully studied sequence of actions that runs like a clockwork. That is part of its beauty.

The unique quality of a typical close-up performance on the other hand is a much higher degree of interaction between the performer and the spectators: Before and after the performance of individual tricks people ask questions, tell little stories, joke, laugh and talk about what they have seen. During these moments there is no “performance.” It’s like an intermission between acts. After a while, the performer strikes the gong, everybody re-enters the theatre and the performance is resumed. “Striking the gong” is switching back to Performing Mode and it is clearly marked by a change of attitude: The performer sits up straight, pulls back his sleeves and gets ready for the next effect. The spectators focus on the performer again, clear their minds, stop talking and lean in to watch whatever miracles are awaiting them next. All of this is well known and I guess there are few close-up performers who have never set-up some cards in preparation for the next effect while “toying with the deck.” What opens up a whole area of possibilities is the realization that we can create those “intermissions” almost at will not only before and after but also during the course of a trick. This allows us to do all sorts of method-related business quite openly without it being perceived as part of the show.

A good illustration of the principle is the following gag: You bet a friend that you have full control over his body. You claim you can make him move at your command and that he will have no chance whatsoever to resist your powers. To prove your point, suggest you will make him turn over his hand against his will and without touching him. When he agrees officially start the demonstration: Hold out your hands horizontally, and carefully position one above the other a few inches apart with the palms “facing” each other. Take your time, as if everything had to be adjusted just right. Have him place his hand flat between yours.

As soon as he does so add: “No, the other way round.” He turns over his hand and – Tadaaa! – you have made your point!

This gag is not as silly as it seems. Think about it: You tell your friend you are going to make him turn over his hand. He tries to work against you. Yet, one second later he voluntarily turns over his hand. Why does this work? It works because he did not take your instruction to turn over his hand as part of the test; for him, the demonstration had not yet started. This is remarkable: Even though you have officially announced the performance to begin just a second ago, just with a slight change of attitude and slightly different inflection of your voice you have made him perceive the crucial instruction as an irrelevant formality.

There’s one difference to this gag-example and the application of this principle to magic: In the above gag your friend will realize what happened as soon as you say “Tadaaa.” In magic, instead of revealing that your spectators misjudged the importance of a certain moment, you confirm their (mistaken) intuition that the little spontaneous “intermission” really was just that by officially switching back to Performing Mode and officially resuming the performance.

In short: By changing the inflection of your voice, your posture and your overall attitude it is possible to put actions “in parenthesis,” to make certain moments during your performance seem unplanned, and not part of the show. Your spectators will still see what you are doing (just like your friend heard you say “no, the other way round”) but done correctly, they will tend to dismiss those moments as unimportant asides and forget about them the moment you “switch back” and continue the show. Unlike in “misdirection,” you don’t try to hide anything or make anybody look elsewhere; you are happy to have your

spectators watch everything you do, assuring that it is perceived as nothing of importance and forgotten a second later.

Using this idea of planting a few “mini-intermissions” in your performance is a double-edged sword: On one hand it allows you to make some “tricky” actions pass more or less unperceived without leaving your spectators with the feeling of having been “misdirected” or having missed anything. On the other hand it interrupts the flow of your show. The more often you apparently leave Performing Mode, the more spontaneous, unplanned and “loose” your performance will appear. That might or might not suit you very well, depending on your style. I for one believe when Dai Vernon talked about clarity of effect he was right in saying “Confusion is not magic.” When talking about method, however, I tend to add “...but it helps.”

Credit for the general concept of “The Performing Mode” is attributed to Rafael Benatar [see “The Performing Mode Theory,” MAGIC, January 2001, pg. 21].

Pit Hartling
Card Fictions
2003

Let's end our discussion in this section with Milt Kort's comically brief take on method. But in the spaces between these few words, there is great wisdom to be found.

MILT KORT

I met Milt Kort (1917-2003) when I was a boy. By that time he was older, and his sleight-of-hand faculty had left him. Yet he astounded me with his unassuming but powerful magic. He recounted many funny and insightful stories about his interaction with other luminaries in our field. And he had a dry, abbreviated wit, as evidenced by this terse essay.



KORT'S CARDINAL RULES OF MAGIC

BY MILT KORT

Rule 1: It's the little things that count.

Rule 2: Always take every advantage you can.

Milt Kort

Kort

1999

PARTSIX



TECHNIQUE

"EVERYONE KNOWS THE DIFFICULTY
OF THINGS THAT ARE EXQUISITE AND
WELL DONE-SO TO HAVE FACILITY
IN SUCH THINGS GIVE RISE TO THE
GREATEST WONDER."

-BALDASSARE CASTIGLIONE, 1528

In the essay that follows, Darwin Ortiz makes this claim:

The magic is not there to validate a dramatic premise, the dramatic premise is used to add impact to the magic, to make the experience of the impossible that much more powerful.

Ortiz goes on to make the case that showmanship is a viable part of technique, but we must remember that it cannot take the place of technique, or make up for a deficiency in skill. These words are also the only caution in this book against over-presenting. The only thing worse than a magician who offers no presentation in his work is the magician who offers too much presentation and too little magic.

SHOWMANSHIP AS TECHNIQUE

BY DARWIN ORTIZ

Most writing on magic presentation falls into one of two categories. The first is the “wear a clean shirt, smile a lot, and be yourself” school. Certainly, this sort of advice isn’t wrong. But it’s so elementary and superficial that anybody who has gotten beyond the kindergarten stage of showmanship must sense that there has to be more to the subject.

The other category is the sermonizing school. These are the magazine articles that exhort magicians to be more entertaining, think more about their audiences, etc. Like a preacher in the pulpit on Sunday morning, the author berates the reader for his sins and warns him to become more entertaining before he’s smitten by the hand of God. The only thing the author doesn’t do is tell the reader how to make his magic more entertaining. (Cynic that I am, I always suspect it’s because the author has no idea how.)

I figure that any magician who isn’t entertaining either is totally oblivious to the impact he has on audiences, in which case he is beyond hope, or wants to improve but doesn’t know how. In

this book you won't find any sermons or diatribes, just a nuts-and-bolts approach that will tell you how.

I expect that most magicians will label this book a work on magic theory. I don't see it that way. *Our Magic* is an example of a book on magic theory and a brilliant one. This is a book on technique. I know that when magicians speak of technique they mean sleight-of-hand moves. But there is another body of technique at least as important to your success as an entertainer: the theatrical and psychological techniques you employ to elicit the kind of reaction you want from an audience. In this sense, this book is analogous to a book on art technique, film technique, acting technique, or writing technique.

If you want to paint, you had better understand the rules of perspective and composition. In film, a lap dissolve will have one effect on an audience, a match dissolve will have another, a fade will still have still a different effect. If you're going to direct a film and want to make sure the audience feels what you want them to feel when you want them to feel it, you'd better know the difference. Then it's up to you to decide which one to use when. It's the same with magic. Technique comes, in part, from an understanding of underlying principles. For that reason, we will start our study of presentation with a brief discussion of "theory." Just keep in mind that this is simply to establish a foundation for understanding what this book is really about: providing you with a set of concrete, practical tools you can use in different situations to affect the audience the way you want to affect them. Once you understand what these tools are, what they do, how they work, and how to apply them, it'll be your job as an artist to decide which ones to use for which jobs.

As we proceed, you'll find there will be situations where you'll need considerable ingenuity and creativity to find ways to incorporate various techniques into a trick in order to achieve

the effect you want to have on the audience. Good presentation, in fact, requires a great deal of creativity.

In magic, creativity in fashioning presentations has never been as recognized and valued as creativity in devising effects and methods. I believe this is because most magicians are hobbyists who perform mainly for other magicians. Magician audiences are, of course, notorious for responding more strongly to effect and method than to presentation. However, if you perform for laypeople, you'll find that presentation offers as fertile and challenging an outlet for creativity as effects and methods, and one that is at least as rewarding.

"Our task is amazement, not amusement. Always amazement first."
—René Lavand

MAGIC AS MYSTERY

"A conjuror is nothing if he only amuses and fails to inspire wonder."
—Thomas Frost, *The Lives of the Conjurors*

*"Entertainment is broader than amusement. Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* is amusing; his *Hamlet* is not. Nevertheless, the fact that *Hamlet* is far more popular than the *Comedy of Errors* proves that it is also far more entertaining."*
—Henning Nelms, *Magic and Showmanship*

MEMORABLE MAGIC

Witnessing a close-up magic performance can be an experience so memorable that the spectator will literally remember it for the rest of his life. If you think that's a ridiculous claim, consider this. Have you ever been at a social gathering where people learn that you're a magician, and immediately someone comes up to you and says, "You know I saw a magician one time who did

[then follows a vivid, although perhaps inaccurate description of some magic trick]. I'll never forget that!"

I think most of us have had this experience many times. Often the performance that person describes is something he witnessed ten or fifteen years ago or even further back. Yet it made such a strong impression that the moment he heard the word "magician" the experience popped into his head and he was impelled to tell you about it.

Whenever I pick up a deck of cards to perform, my goal is to make such a strong impression on each spectator that whenever the subject of card tricks or card cheating comes up in the future—indeed, virtually any time he sees a deck of cards—he'll think of me. And I know that if I do my job right, that is exactly what will happen.

I believe every close-up magician should set similar goals for himself. To do that, you have to focus on making your magic as strong as possible. Of the several fundamental premises that underlie this book, the most basic one is this: The magician's primary job is to entertain his audience with magic. Not merely to entertain his audience while doing magic, but to entertain them with magic. The most important source of entertainment should be the magic itself. Unfortunately, many magicians don't seem to believe that magic in itself can be entertaining to laypeople. They feel that, in order to hold their audience's attention, they have to lard their performances with bad jokes that would shame any Borscht-Belt comic. They think the term "commercial magic" has to mean a string of lightweight ten-second gag/tricks relying on cuteness rather than mystery, but justifying their existence because they elicit a momentary chuckle (or groan) from the spectator. The result is a performance that is like watching old TV reruns of *The Dukes of Hazzard*—mindless

entertainment that momentarily diverts but is forgotten almost the instant it's over.

THE MAGICAL EXPERIENCE

This sort of magic results from what I call “Fitzkee’s fallacy,” the belief that magic has no inherent entertainment value. In *Showmanship for Magicians*, Dariel Fitzkee’s prescription for making magic entertaining is to introduce music, dance, comedy, and sex appeal into the magic performance. In his view, magic is some sort of bitter pill that you have to sugar-coat in order to get the audience to swallow. I don’t want you to think I’m suggesting there is anything wrong with employing such elements to add to the appeal of a magic performance. But thinking that this is all there is to making magic - entertaining overlooks the most obvious, and the most important, way you can make magic more entertaining: by making the magic itself more entertaining.

If you don’t believe that magic itself can be entertaining, if you don’t believe that experiencing apparent impossibilities can be strong, unique, and memorable entertainment for an audience, I won’t argue the point with you. I’ll only suggest that you give up magic. If you really think that magic is of no value except as a peg on which to hang music, dance, comedy, and sex appeal, you should become a musician, dancer, comedian, or stripper and forget about magic.

I believe that not only can magic, in itself, be highly entertaining, but that magic offers an entertainment experience that is qualitatively different from what an audience can get from music, dance, comedy, or any other form of entertainment—not necessarily better, but different. That unique entertainment experience comes from mystery, the experience of the impossible.

Frankly, if you don't strongly want to give your audiences that particular entertainment experience you don't belong in magic. Once you accept the premise that entertaining with magic is your main priority, you'll find it has some important implications. It doesn't mean that you turn your back on the possibilities of using comedy, storytelling, music, or other elements to enhance your magic, It does mean that your first priority is making your magic as powerful and memorable as possible. It means that you use elements like comedy primarily to make your magic stronger. If a gag strengthens the magic, it goes in; if a gag weakens the magic, it goes out.

You must never lose sight of your primary goal: to make your audience experience mystery. If magic has any claim to being an art it lies in its unique ability to make a spectator confront the impossible, along with the exhilarating feeling this entails as a trapdoor opens under everything he thinks he knows about reality and his mind goes into freefall.

Even viewed purely as entertainment, this feeling—the magical experience—is not only the most unique, but also the strongest entertainment experience you as a magician can give your audience. But before you can start working on affecting the audience's state of mind, you may have to change your own attitudes.

THE CHALLENGE ATTITUDE

There are many people in this world who hate bad magic. (I'm one of them.) But there are also some people who hate good magic. Magic, to them, means that if you fool them, they lose and you win. If they catch you, they win and you lose. Fortunately, such people are few and far between.

Of more concern is the fact that virtually any audience may fall into the mindset of viewing a magic performance as a win—lose situation if you encourage them to. It's your job to make them see it as a win-win situation. If the magician wins, everyone wins—you get the satisfaction of entertaining them and they get the pleasure of being entertained. If you lose, everyone loses—what could have been an enjoyable experience becomes a waste of time. A good magic performance is a cooperative venture, not a competitive one. The audience should actually be your allies in fooling them.

A key to achieving this partnership with the audience is avoiding any sense of challenge in your presentation. The late Fred Robinson was fond of quoting Fred Kaps to the effect that, "There is no place for challenge in professional magic." I would go further and say that there is no place for challenge in good magic. The performer who challenges his audience to figure out how the tricks are done is reinforcing the win—lose model.

A problem arises when trying to get magicians to see the self-defeating nature of challenge magic, and it's one that I think I had best deal with head-on. The problem is the fact that some of the most legendary figures in magic have used the challenge approach.

In an interview in the English magic magazine *Opus*, Scottish cardman Gordon Bruce quite rightly advises novice magicians to avoid the challenge approach. He then goes on to say, "Slydini does it all the time but only gets away with it because he is a master."

The fact is that Slydini only got away with it because he spent his entire life performing for other magicians. I don't believe Slydini could ever have sustained a career performing for laypeople without drastically altering his challenge style of presentation.

The fact that he never succeeded in having such a career may indicate as much. Slydini's career consisted of performing for and lecturing to other magicians and, particularly, giving lessons to other magicians. As such, his presentational style should not provide a model for anyone interested in entertaining the public. Slydini was a genius whose thinking on misdirection revolutionized close-up magic and who also contributed numerous seminal techniques to the table-worker's armory. However, his challenge approach is so well-known to magicians and represents such a perfect example of what not to do, that I feel it necessary to analyze this negative feature of his work further.

After fooling a spectator several times with the same effect, Slydini would ask him, "You know why you no see? Because you no watch!"

Translation: "You know why you didn't catch me? Because you're stupid!" After fooling another spectator with several repetitions of the Coins Through the Table, he would reassure him with the statement, "I do it again and this time you catch!" When Slydini did it again and the spectator still didn't catch, it was reasonable for him to wonder if there was something wrong with him. Presumably, other people usually caught on at this point.

Even worse, the spectator would have to feel that he had failed in his mission. Slydini's comments made it clear that the spectator's job was to catch the magician. So far he had lost and the magician had won. He could only hope that next time he would win and the magician would lose.

One of the most harmful aspects of the challenge approach is that it undermines the illusion of magic. Every time Slydini chided a spectator for not catching him, he reminded the audience that

there was something to catch—that it wasn't really magic. Every time John Ramsay faked a palm, then showed his hand empty, he reminded the viewer that he was just watching “tricks” that depended on things like palming. Such an approach is not likely to give an audience a sense of wonder at having seen an impossibility. It's more likely to leave them with a sense of frustration at having been outwitted.

The challenge approach relates to the puzzle mentality we'll be discussing in a moment. Puzzles have solutions. We may not know what the solution is, but we know there is one. Magic, on the other hand, is, by definition, an eternal mystery for which there is no possible solution. Therefore, it doesn't make any sense to challenge the audience to find a solution.

I suspect there may be something about performing for other magicians that tends to promote a challenge style. Is it just a coincidence that John Ramsay, another of the legendary close-up magicians of this century, also built his style around the challenge approach, relying on the constant use of feints and sucker moves to rub his audience's noses in the fact that he was fooling them? Ramsay would even taunt spectators by following a coin vanish with the comment, “You don't know where the coin is, do you, laddie?”

Of course, Ramsay made his living running a grocery store. If you want to pattern your performing approach after one of this century's legendary magicians, I suggest that a better model is Fred Kaps, a magician who made his living performing for the public. You'll recall his advice was, “There is no place for challenge in professional magic.”

I want to make it clear that what I am advising against is a challenging attitude on the part of the performer. There is, for example, nothing wrong with presenting an effect under

challenge conditions. You must, however, make it clear by your attitude that you're challenging yourself to succeed under impossible conditions- you're not challenging the audience to catch you.

Similarly, any apparent impossibility poses an implicit challenge to an audience to find a natural explanation. In magic, effects that involve repetition, such as the "Ambitious Card," a one-at-a-time ace assembly, or a repeat "Oil and Water" routine, particularly pose a challenge to the audience to figure them out. With each new repetition they consider new theories and are forced to reject them. This process of implicitly making the audience consider every possible explanation until they finally have to accept that there is no explanation can be an extremely effective way of leading them to embrace the impossible—just what magic should be all about. (Juan Tamariz explores this concept in *The Magic Way*.) Just make sure the challenge comes from the impossibility you present, not from your own attitude. Your attitude should be that there is no explanation to be sought; it's just magic.

THE PUZZLE MENTALITY

"I've never dealt with whodunits. They're simply clever puzzles, aren't they? They're intellectual rather than emotional, and emotion is the only thing that keeps my audiences interested."

—Alfred Hitchcock

When I was about nine years old, I got a children's magic set. Along with paddle tricks and all the other slum magic that form the standard magic-set fare, it also included about a half-dozen wire puzzles. I remember wondering what these were doing in the set since I knew that puzzles and magic weren't the same

thing. This simple truth that any nine year old instinctively knows is one that many magicians fail to realize.

A magical effect may be very puzzling, but it's not a puzzle. A puzzle admits of a possible solution, at least in theory. True magic admits of no possible solution; it's an eternal mystery. Even more important, a puzzle is strictly an intellectual challenge with no emotions element—unless you count the frustration. Emotionless intellect is precisely what we want to avoid in magic. (As we've just seen challenge is another good thing to avoid in magic.) The only satisfaction of a puzzle comes from solving it; the satisfaction of the spectator must come in part from not solving it.

A sign of the prevalence of this puzzle mentality in magic is the habit some cardmen have of referring to every plot for a trick as a "card problem" and every effect employing that plot as a "solution" to the problem. Constructing a magical effect usually involves solving many problems, just as writing a novel may require solving many problems of plot, characterization, and style. Yet, no writer would ever refer to his plot as a problem and the finished novel as the solution. The very problem/solution terminology suggests a desire to reduce the creative process to an intellectual exercise. The artistic process, whether in creating effects or presentations is much more complex than that.

The failure to clearly distinguish between magic and puzzles is one of the most pernicious, as well as one of the most pervasive, trends in magic. My own field of card magic is particularly plagued by this problem. In *Ibidem* No. 21, Norm Houghton speaks of "amateur mathematicians who have somehow acquired the quaint delusion that their hobby is magic." Unfortunately, the accusation is only too true. The problem stems in part from the fact that many magicians are also puzzle fans. In fact, during the short history of close-up magic, a number of well-known

practitioners have also been prominent puzzle experts. Many magic magazines also publish puzzles from time to time. With this dual love in the bosoms of so many magicians, it's little wonder they sometimes get the two confused.

It also makes it difficult for them to recognize that most people don't like puzzles. In fact, many people hate them. I'm not very fond of puzzles myself. (It probably goes back to getting gypped on that magic set.) I think that as a magician I'm fortunate in this regard. This attitude brings me closer to the viewpoint of most laypeople, something that every magician should strive for.

If you're one of those magicians who likes puzzles, you're going to have to be particularly alert to the danger of allowing your magic to degenerate into mere puzzles. Strive to give your audiences impossibilities rather than puzzles. Let them experience wonder rather than frustration.

THE ILLUSION OF IMPOSSIBILITY

There is a world of difference between a spectator's not knowing how something's done versus his knowing that it can't be done.

—Simon Aronson, *The Aronson Approach*

An interesting difference between performing for magicians and performing for laypeople is that, if a magician succeeds in figuring out ninety percent of a trick but can't figure out the other ten percent, he will feel that the trick fooled him; if a layperson succeeds in figuring out ten percent of a trick but can't figure out the other ninety percent of the trick, he will feel that it didn't fool him. The magician will think, "I know how he controlled my card to the top of the deck and I saw him palm the card. But I don't know how he got it between those two plastic sheets that were taped together on all sides. He really fooled

me” The layperson will think, “He didn’t fool me; I saw him palm the card.”

This attitude on the part of lay audiences frustrates some magicians who are inclined to respond, “Yeah, but how did I locate your card in the first place, and how did I get it between the plastic sheets?” The layperson’s response will be something like, “Oh, you got it in there somehow. But you didn’t fool me; I saw the card in your hand.” Which attitude is correct, that of magician audiences or lay audiences? It depends on whether you feel that magic is supposed to be a puzzle or an apparent impossibility. Suppose a person is putting together a 100—piece jigsaw puzzle. He gets ninety pieces into place, but can’t get the last ten pieces to fit. He will feel that he failed to solve the puzzle. Suppose you’re watching something that is allegedly achieved by supernatural means. You spot some wires that are obviously being manipulated from offstage. You may not know exactly what those wires have to do with what you’re seeing, but you know they must have something to do with it. You also know that supernatural phenomena don’t require wires. You weren’t fooled; you saw the wires.

The question in the magician—spectator’s mind is, “What is the explanation?” The question in the lay—spectator’s mind is, “Is there an explanation?” Therefore, to move a layperson, you must do something far more difficult than fooling him, you must create an illusion of impossibility. I would go so far as to say that *the illusion of impossibility* is as good a definition of what constitutes magic as I can imagine.

Of course, creating an illusion is far more difficult than merely puzzling someone. A magical illusion is the most fragile thing in world. It’s like a delicate soap bubble that can be burst by sharp objects, sudden jostling, or even a gust of wind. Since most magicians will always choose the easiest path rather than

the most effective, you can expect that most of your magician friends will settle for doing puzzles. If you choose the path of self-discipline rather than indulgence, you'll have to work very hard to master the technique taught in this book in order to nurture the illusion of impossibility.

REACHING THE EMOTIONS

One may disbelieve with his mind yet still believe with his blood.

—Edward Wagenknecht

Probably the key reason why many magicians lack faith in magic as entertainment is the feeling that magic has lost its hold over modern audiences because people no longer believe in magic as a literal reality. Let's examine this matter of belief more closely since it's fundamental to understanding the role of showmanship in magic.

It's become fashionable among those few magicians who even bother to discuss showmanship to talk about getting audiences to "willingly suspend their disbelief." This phrase was first coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge to refer to the attitude required of theater audiences. While quite apt in that context, it's not really appropriate to magic.

To understand why, let's contrast the attitude of a theater-going audience to that of a spectator watching close-up magic. A person goes to a performance of J.M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan*. He knows that people can't fly and he knows that the actor portraying Peter Pan is not really flying through the air. In order to enjoy the play, however, he is going to have to pretend that a person can fly and forget he is watching an actor suspended by wires. Since the wires are visible to anyone who looks hard

enough, the spectator must do this willingly or the play won't work for him.

By contrast, consider a spectator watching a magician make a dollar bill float through the air. The spectator could willingly suspend his disbelief and pretend that dollar bills can float. If he did that, it wouldn't matter if he saw the thread attached to the bill, anymore than it matters that he can see the wires attached to Peter Pan. However, if he took that attitude, the magic wouldn't have much impact on him. The floating bill is strong magic precisely because the spectator will not willingly believe that bills can float. It's the fact that his intellect doesn't want to believe, yet his senses force him to, that gives the magic its power.

Yet, it's also true that in order for close-up magic to be effective, the spectator must become a co-conspirator with the performer in pulling off the scam. Here we come to a paradox that is central to understanding the power of magic as entertainment. Most people have an intellectual resistance to believing in the impossible while at the same time having an emotional desire to believe in the impossible. It is this tension at the heart of the human spirit that strong magic evokes. The result is the wonder and awe that a magic always generates. So forget about creating willing suspension of disbelief. Get your audience to actually believe in magic.

INTELLECTUAL VS. EMOTIONAL BELIEF

It sounds like an impossible goal, doesn't it? How can you make a sophisticated, modern audience believe in magic? You can't, if talking about intellectual belief. I'm talking about emotional belief. An anecdote from the nineteenth century perfectly captures the difference between intellectual belief and emotional

belief. Madam De Duffand was asked whether she believed in ghosts. She responded, "No. But I am afraid of them."

The impact of a magic effect is directly proportional to the degree to which it engages the emotions of the spectator. The reaction to strong magic is always emotional. Poker expert Mike Caro once said, "Losers exaggerate [how much money they lost]. That's because they're not trying to convey what really happened so much as how bad they feel." This is also why laypeople often exaggerate a magic effect when they describe it to another. They're not really trying to communicate what happened. They're trying to convey the emotion they felt when they witnessed it.

If the impact of magic is on the emotions, it follows that your presentations have to be designed to reach the emotions. The problem is that the intellect always attempts to protect the emotions. It's like a guard standing before a set of iron gates. When you show someone an apparent impossibility, before he can get emotionally excited, his intellect will say, "Wait a minute. I can figure this out. There has to be a rational explanation." It's only when his intellect surrenders and admits that there is no explanation that the gates swing open and you can reach his emotions. (If an effect is properly structured, that whole process may take a split second.) Therefore, if you want to reach the spectator's emotions, you first have to literally baffle his intellect -- leave it without any possible explanation.

Certainly, you will never achieve intellectual belief with an audience. They will always know in the backs of their minds that there's really no such thing as magic. However, when you succeed in baffling their intellects by creating strong conviction, you will achieve emotional belief. On a gut level, they will react as if the magic is real. Remember Madam De Duffand? She knew

intellectually that ghosts don't exist. But that didn't prevent her from reacting on an emotional level as if they did.

NARRATIVE ART

Unlike static art forms like painting, sculpture, and photography, and purely expressive art forms like music and dance, magic is a narrative art form. This simply means that magic tells a story. I'm not here referring to the fact that some magical presentations use a story to accompany the effect. I mean that every effect is itself a story, regardless of the presentation accompanying it. Like any story, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. As with any narrative art, the audience watches because it wants to find out what will happen next. When a spectator watches a magic trick, he is witnessing, and sometimes participating in, a story: the story of what happens in the magic trick.

This means that part of magic presentation technique is narrative technique. It is concerned with considerations of theme, characterization, conflict, plotting, story line, clarity, atmosphere, and dramatic structure. These are the same considerations that are central to all narrative arts: film, theater, fiction, and storytelling.

I stress this because, as obvious as the point is, it has received very little attention in magic literature. Therefore, this way of thinking is likely to strike many readers as strange. In developing the concepts explored in this book I'll often employ analogies to other narrative arts and cite principles that are accepted as axiomatic in all other narrative arts, yet hardly recognized in magic. I think that as we go along you'll come to appreciate that the better you understand the principles of narrative art generally the more effective you'll be as a magical entertainer. While every magic trick tells a story, it's important to realize that the prime goal of magic is not to tell a story but to create a

sensation. I mention this because, in addition to Fitzkee's fallacy, another common error is what I call "the theatrical fallacy." Some of the magicians and magical writers most concerned with presentation make the mistake of thinking that the point of a magic effect is to support a dramatic premise, much like theatrical effects or film special effects do. (This, for example, is a flaw in Henning Nelms' otherwise outstanding *Magic and Showmanship*. Not surprisingly, Nelms' background was in theater.)

If, however, our fundamental premise is correct that the unique strength of magic is that it gives the audience the experience of confronting the impossible, it follows that the point of a dramatic presentation is to enhance the magic. The magic is not there to validate a dramatic premise, the dramatic premise is used to add impact to the magic, to make the experience of the impossible that much more powerful.

With these thoughts in the backs of our minds, I think we're ready to leave theory, roll up our sleeves, and plunge into technique.

Darwin Ortiz
Strong Magic
1994

DARWIN ORTIZ

Darwin Ortiz is known as an authority on both magic and gambling, and his creative output with a pack of cards has been staggering. In 1994 he raised many eyebrows with *Strong Magic*, and in the ensuing time it has taken its place in the pantheon of the very best magic books ever written. Ortiz challenged many classic theories in magic, and codified many new ones.



The Spanish master Arturo de Ascanio divides the execution of magic into three areas in this article: timing, misdirection, and technique. He breaks down technique further into lightness, beauty, and breadth of movement. As you will soon find out, Ascanio was an aesthetic magician: his movements were slow, fluid, and elegant, and this informed his vision of magic.

PERFORMING PRINCIPLES

BY ARTURO DE ASCANIO

Let's now delve into the three performance principles: timing, misdirection and technique.

TIMING. IN-TRANSIT ACTIONS

Timing, a basic principle of magic, is about executing each action at the right time, with the right intensity, and giving it the right degree of importance. It's difficult to assess and to clarify, let alone establish general rules for it. With some effort, however, I have managed to establish a premise that can be instrumental to the understanding of timing, namely the distinction between final actions and in-transit actions.

In a group of gestures, there's a moment when the main gesture, which we'll call the final action, is done. It is the one that motivates all other gestures, which are passing gestures, which we'll call in-transit actions. In-transit actions lead to the final one. Secret actions, thus, must always be executed within the flow of an in-transit action and never during the final action.

One must always look for in-transit actions in which to include the sleights.

The notion of “what for?” is what identifies an in-transit action. The cards are picked up in order to show them, for example. To pick up the cards is an in-transit action in order to show them. The essence of timing lies in accentuating final actions and executing sleights within the in-transit actions.

MISDIRECTION

Now we’re going to discuss misdirection from a practical, not technical, point of view. One of the main principles of misdirection is what we can call the Law of Interest. A spectator watching magic, just as a spectator of everyday life, only sees from among all that surrounds him, that which for some reason captures his attention and interest at that moment. There is always something that interests us and that’s why we pay attention to it. The eye is constantly moving and our brain is translating what the eye sees. But every so often, for some reason, the brain becomes interested in something.

This is the general psychological foundation of misdirection. A concrete application of this is what I call the Law of Primary Motion that can be set forth as follows. When two objects begin to move within a visual field, the human eye tends to follow the first one to initiate movement. The second one to move stays in the shaded area, so to speak, of the spectator’s gaze. Therefore, generally speaking, when a secret action is to be executed one should begin another movement earlier with the other hand.

Another chief aspect here is the coordination of the gaze with gestures and patter. The gaze should be directed to the point we want the spectator to look at, to a point where nothing secret is going on, because secret actions are taking place elsewhere. Aside from physical or material misdirection caused by shifting

the gaze, pater coordinated with gestures is the ideal vehicle for mental misdirection.

Another aspect of misdirection is what I call its darkening feature. Since spectators are continually formulating thoughts and reacting to what they see, we can make thoughts emerge in their minds that darken what is happening before their eyes. It turns out that the mind works in such a way that when we're thinking about one thing, we cannot think of another at the same time. When we listen to the radio we cannot concentrate on what we're reading, and if we focus on what we're reading we cannot hear what is being said on the radio.

The magician can take advantage of this by putting such ideas in the spectator's mind, cluttering it with innocent thoughts, and making use of that darkness to perform a secret action. You can take advantage of moments of astonishment or surprise, as they lock into the spectator's mind, preventing it from analyzing what is happening at the same, or almost at the same time.

TECHNIQUE

Let's touch on some aspects of technique.

Lightness. Good technique, of course, is that which does not seem to exist. Aside from timing and misdirection, another contributing factor is lightness of movement. Heavy technique is bad. Cards should be almost loose in the hand. Relaxation is essential.

Beauty. Technique has an external aspect which can be pleasant or unpleasant, pretty or ugly. Therefore this external aspect should be studied carefully. We should aim for smoothness, for a sensation of beauty in the way the cards, or the objects used, are handled in order to achieve an aesthetically pleasing result.

Breadth of Movement. Finally, one of the aspects of beautiful technique is breadth of movement. Movements should not be short. Beauty must have breadth.

Arturo de Ascanio
The Magic of Ascanio
2005

ARTURO DE ASCANIO

Arturo de Ascanio (1929-1997) is considered the Father of Modern Spanish Magic, and this title has become all the more significant as Spain rises to the apex of cutting-edge magic. Ascanio's influence is prevalent in the work of his star pupil, Juan Tamariz.



We will let Ascanio's previous essay set the curriculum for the remainder of our discussion in this section: he talks of three elements: timing, misdirection, and technique.

*Let's shift our focus to timing. Ascanio already discussed timing as it occurs during a sleight or trick. What about the timing of a trick's plot? Darwin Ortiz explores new theoretical territory with his seminal essay on what he calls *The Critical Interval*, which follows.*

THE CRITICAL INTERVAL

BY DARWIN ORTIZ

The fundamental tension in creating strong magic effects is the struggle between proximity and distance. The method, because it must obey the laws of nature, requires proximity. The effect, because it must appear to defy the laws of nature, requires distance. Fortunately, there are a variety of techniques that, applied creatively, can reconcile these opposing demands. Let's begin by considering how to build a temporal wall between method and effect.

THE CRITICAL INTERVAL

What is the most dangerous moment in any effect in which to perform trickery? Most magicians would probably answer, "When the audience is watching most closely." This answer, however, only raises the question: when is the audience going to be watching most closely? To answer that question, we have to return to Ascanio's definition of a magic effect. You'll recall that it is the difference between the initial condition and the final condition. If you're going to change an apple into an orange, showing the apple is the initial condition and revealing the orange is the final condition. (These roughly correspond to what in *Strong Magic* I called the expository phase and the magical phase. For discussing presentation I think those terms are more

useful. For discussing effect design I think Ascanio's terms are more useful.)

The riskiest moment for trickery is the time between the audience's last view of the initial condition and their first view of the final condition. If you have to cover the apple with a handkerchief to change it into an orange, the danger period extends from the moment you cover the apple to the moment you uncover the orange. This time period is so central to all our subsequent discussions that it deserves a name. I call it "the critical interval." *The critical interval is the time between the audience's last view of the initial condition and their first view of the final condition.*

Depending on the effect, the critical interval can range from a fraction of a second to several minutes. In a color change, the period from the audience's final view of one card to its first view of the other card may be hardly more than the blink of an eye. At the other end of the spectrum, consider the classic *Card in Ring Box* as I employ it in my *Nine-Card Location*. I start by taking out the ring box and placing it in front of a spectator. I instruct her not to take her eyes off it. I then have the selections made, the last of which a spectator signs. After these are lost in the deck, I locate each one in turn. Lastly, the signed card is found folded inside the ring box. Thus, for the *Card in Ring Box* portion of the effect, the critical interval lasts from the moment the signed card is lost in the deck to the moment it's found in the box, a period of about seven minutes.

Whether short or long, the critical interval looms large in the thinking of any audience watching a magic effect. If the initial condition differs from the final condition, common sense dictates that whatever caused the change happened during the critical interval. And remember, common sense is what laypeople rely

on when reacting to a magic effect. The critical interval is when an audience expects the method to happen.

If you doubt that, consider this. One of the best comments you can ever hope to hear at the end of an effect is, "But he didn't do anything!" If the spectator concludes that you "didn't do anything," the next thing he will conclude is, "That's impossible!" Because if you didn't do anything, there is no *cause* to account for the *effect*.

But what does a spectator really mean when he says that you didn't do anything? He does not, of course, mean that you never did anything at any point from the beginning of the effect to the end. (That would certainly make for a dull performance!) You took out the apple. You held up the apple. Perhaps you handed the apple out for examination. You covered the apple. You whisked away the cover to reveal the orange. Perhaps you handed the orange out for examination. All of these things constitute doing something. Yet, he emphatically proclaims that you "didn't do anything."

What the astonished spectator really means is that you didn't do anything *during the critical interval* between his last view of the apple and his first view of the orange. In the audience's mind, this is the only time that matters. If you didn't do anything then, you didn't do anything.

This works the other way also. A spectator may dismiss a trick by saying merely, "You did something." This sort of response frustrates many magicians. They feel that the spectator should be required to either spell out exactly what the magician did or admit defeat. This would be true if we were speaking of a puzzle.

However, if the spectator senses that you “did something” during the critical interval, it’s not magic.

This is one of the reasons why magic happening in a spectator’s hands can be so powerful. If the audience believes that the entire critical interval transpired while the key object was under the spectator’s control, you have a miracle.

Since the critical interval plays such a vital role in the audience’s thinking, it had better play a vital role in your thinking. The less you do during the critical interval, the stronger the effect will be. This is why your instincts may sometimes tell you that, in a particular trick, the crucial move comes at the wrong time. If you don’t fully understand the problem analytically, you might conclude that the solution is to add misdirection to cover the move. If, however, the flaw exists on the design level, adding misdirection will be like painting over cracks in a building caused by a poor foundation. A move comes at the wrong time if it comes when *the audience is expecting it*. Audiences expect the trickery to happen during the critical interval. Everything you do during that period will be scrutinized more closely both at the time and in retrospect. If the trickery really does happen during the critical interval, the weakest solution is to try to cover it with misdirection. The strongest solution is to redesign the method.

Darwin Ortiz

Designing Miracles

2006

"THE EYE SEES ONLY WHAT
THE MIND IS PREPARED TO
COMPREHEND."

-HENRI BERGSON

Misdirection. For a thousand years magicians have come to define misdirection in basically the same way: making a spectator look away from a particular place. The following essay is revolutionary; it reimagines (and renames) the concept of misdirection. "Direction," Tommy tells us, does not start and stop with a secret move, but is a continuous, flowing strategy used in every moment of performance. And we must train ourselves not to think of misdirection as shifting attention away from something secret, but instead toward something of interest.

GETTING THE MIS OUT OF MISDIRECTION

BY TOMMY WONDER,
WITH STEPHEN MINCH

Misdirection. So much is written about it, so much is said out it. Often when spectators talk with magicians, you hear, “I’ll bet you misdirected me, didn’t you?” For we readily confess to using misdirection – and it is true. It is one of the strongest and most interesting tools we have. Many, although, unfortunately not all, magicians will admit this. However, do you use it to sometimes “confess” to your spectators? Do you use it as much as you should? Are you really using it at all?

OUTSIDE INSIDE

I suppose that there are several reasons readily cited to account at least in part for why misdirection is not used to the extent it should be. But even with those who do use it consistently and are very aware of its power, I often sense that its entire benefit is not reaped. That we are not always deriving from this tool the full strength and illusion it can provide. I think this occurs because misdirection is often applied as it is learned. As you discover certain things, characteristics of certain misdirectional

loys, those ploys are used wherever they seem suitable. Often, though, such applications are not suitable at all. Let me explain. The usual way to understand something new is to approach it from the outside. Often that's the only way. From the outside we examine the subject and probe more and more deeply into it; and at the same time our understanding of it should grow. When examining misdirection, it doesn't take long to find out that there are all kinds of link systems, ploys, tricks of the trade. For instance: Have something happen away from the secret – Ask a question - If you want the audience to look at an object, look at it yourself - Look them in the eye if you want them to look at you - Make them laugh - Take advantage of relaxation. On examining successful misdirection one will find that these things, these tricks of the trade, work; and it is logical then to use them, or at least to try to use them to cover up weaknesses or perilous moments in your work.

Do you have to palm a card? Ask someone a question and, while they are busy answering, bingo, you palm the card. Problem solved! Do you need to load a cup? Say something funny. They will laugh and you can safely load that lemon. Once again, problem solved! Isn't misdirection great?

This method of applying the tricks of misdirection – which your study has shown to be effective in the performances and writings of other magicians – may seem valid; and yes, properly applied, all these different techniques will definitely work. They will help to hide the weak spots, discrepancies, secrets, unnatural procedures...But is this the *best* approach? Is it best to examine your routine, find the weak or dangerous spots, then plaster over each of them with some form of misdirection?

Although this approach can do what you ask of it, distracting from the defects of your method. I doubt that such a path will yield the finest results possible. Undoubtedly, misdirection can

offer such services in abundance. However, by applying it in this way, you use only a sliver of its potential. Aren't we merely patching up leaky holes in a less than perfect trick or routine? Of course, patching such holes will prevent the boat from sinking, which is always better than going down. But wouldn't it be better to build your boat without holes in the first place? Won't that give more artistically satisfying results right from the start? In magic you have an effect, an ideal. Maintaining this ideal, originally pristine and beautiful, is difficult if, before even the first performance, you find holes that need patching with extraneous ploys. Such an approach originates from outside. Misdirection is used as an external measure, a tool divorced from the effect. Thus it cannot be an integral element of the procedure, woven naturally into the original design. I believe that, in such circumstances, you will have an extremely difficult time devising misdirection that functions logically and naturally within the envisioned effect.

At one point Slydini speaks of magic as a piece of cloth. When creating a presentation you weave your cloth using misdirection as just one of the threads. It is then fully part of the whole, integrated. The misdirection is woven in during the initial designing. This is much different from weaving a cloth, then discovering that there are one or two holes in it, and sewing those holes closed with an extra thread. The result is a cloth without true beauty, for the mended parts will probably be a little rough and stiff. The cloth won't have the beautiful feel and texture it could have. It stands to reason the mending weak parts afterward can only result in a patched piece of work.

Studying misdirection only to find little strategies that you might use will surely give you a means to strengthen your magic; this can't be denied. However, I believe there is another way, one

that will unleash far more power for you, and one that offers far better chances of achieving something of real beauty.

This other way, an *inside* approach, is not easier or faster than the usual *outside* approach and therefore might be considered less practical by some. In the beginning, this inside approach will take more time and effort; indeed, at first it may seem hopelessly difficult – but once you get used to it and have gone through the process several times, it becomes easier. It will never be as easy as the usual method of patching up your work with misdirection, but then again, the results will please you more. I am certain that with an inside approach you can achieve misdirection that is woven naturally into your routines, an integral part of them, inseparable and far more artistically sound; and falling short of true artistry, at the least they will be more subtle, more devious and more effective. In addition, you will find them incredibly easy to execute and with greater protection against failure.

Sound promising? Perhaps, then, we should have a look at this inside approach. However, I must ask for your patience. Before we can see how an inside approach can work, we must first gain a clear understanding of the different factors that affect misdirection.

We must first study the often used systems, the standard tricks of misdirection. I will not attempt to make a complete analysis of all the ploys available. Other people have already done that in an admirable way. Fitzkee's book, *Magic by Misdirection*, although written in the 1940s, is still a monumental work on this subject. Henning Nelms, in his *Magic and Showmanship*, has some very important things to say as well. I can only advise you to study these texts along with other books on the topic, the

performances of other magicians, your own experiences and, most important, your own observations.

What I will discuss here are various ideas of mine, some of which I believe differ to some degree from those already published, and some of which I have never read anywhere else. I will also make some general observations that offer no fresh concepts in themselves, but are necessary to understand ensuing ideas that are new. But I repeat. I make no attempt at completeness.

Let's first approach this great invisible beast from the outside. Let's dissect it, tear it apart, analyse it, consider it and try to understand it. Then when we understand the parts sufficiently, we'll unite them again, enabled by our understanding to play with their union, since it has become a part of ourselves. We can start, armed with a thorough understanding of the elements involved and with an approach from the inside, to create the most elegant, artistic and effective misdirection imaginable. At least it is the most beautiful formulation of misdirection that I can conceive.

MISDIRECTION

Okay, let's begin at the beginning:

MIS-DIRECTION – It's truly unfortunate that in magic we have many terms and expressions that don't accurately reflect what they are intended to do. This is a pity because the use of correct terminology helps to keep one's thinking straight, and greatly simplifies matters when magicians communicate with each other. One of our more serious misnomers is the word *misdirection*.

Misdirection implies "wrong" direction. It suggests that attention is directed away from something. By constantly using

this term, it eventually becomes so ingrained in our minds that we might start to perceive misdirection as directing attention away from rather than toward something. Newcomers to magic will almost certainly think along such incorrect lines, because we have chosen a word that promotes this misconception.

Let me try to explain with an example why misdirection should never be a diverting of attention from something. Suppose I say, "I want to get out of the city for the weekend." Here I have not said where I will go, only that it will not be in the city. The city, where I won't be, gets all the attention in my sentence, and the place I will go gets none.

If said instead that I wished to go to a specific village for the weekend, I wouldn't be speaking of the city at all, but only of the village I intend to visit. When I go to this village, I naturally won't be in the city, but no attention is focused on the city. Attention is properly placed on the village to which I will travel. The sentence becomes a positive one, carrying a positive meaning directed at the village.

Let's now translate this into magical terms. Let's assume you wish to do a trick in which you palm a card from the deck using your right hand. While you are palming the card, you want to direct the audience's attention from the right hand. All your efforts are concentrated on getting attention off the right hand – off the right hand – *off the right hand*. And in your mind, all you are thinking about is *your right hand*! It's hard for you to forget that hand; and your audience may sense your concern and concentration on your hand. They may actually become intent, just like you are, on your right hand - and then they will see you palm the card!

However, now imagine that you use your left hand to move a glass to your kit on the table while you palm the card. Now,

don't try to direct attention away from the right hand; instead direct all attention to your left hand as it moves the glass. Don't worry if someone is watching your right hand. Forget it. Don't be concerned about it. Concentrate instead on the glass, on how you grasp it, where you move it, etc. Now your mind is entirely focused on the glass, and you will actually be able to forget that the right hand is palming a card. This is a much more positive approach than the previous one, and it results in there being no attention on your right hand. Your attention and the attention of the audience will be on the glass.

It is said, and I believe it to be true, that the subconscious mind is capable only of taking in the positive meaning of things. This is due to its ability to think in concrete pictures rather than abstract words.

Words have no power in your mind. Imagining something with words alone is hard, perhaps impossible. For instance, imagine that you wish to ask your employer for a raise. Mentally, though, you envision his telling you no and dismissing you from his office. As you picture this scene you can say to yourself, "I don't want that to happen," but your mind pushes this denial aside and continues to see your failure. This mental picture can shape future reality, resulting in your actually being denied the raise! This occurs because the scene of failure you have imagined causes you to behave a bit nervously, perhaps, or unsure of yourself – little uncontrollable things, which convey to your employer an impression that you aren't sure yourself if you deserve a raise. This, naturally, makes it easy for him to dismiss the idea.

Essentially the same thing occurs when you are concentrating on your right hand and the card it must palm. The picture is there, containing your fear of the palmed card being seen, and consequently uncontrollable signs produced by your fear betray you, palmed card to be detected.

Returning to our example of the raise, imagine that you were now to concentrate on a positive scenario: You see your employer agreeing with you that you deserve a raise, after which he grants it. This mental picture helps to produce behavior in you that broadcasts different signals. Behind your actual conversation there now lies an impression that your employer will give you the raise; and he will sense this confidence through subtle details. Consequently, he will find it more difficult to deny the raise, since your attitude has made it easier for him to perceive your request as a reasonable one. The chances of your getting the raise are much greater. This is nothing more than the power of positive thinking. People are generally pushed in the direction that takes the least effort on their parts.

In magic this translates into adhering only to positive ideas. Negative approaches, like that of directing attention away from your hand as it palms a card, only create negative pictures that fulfill themselves, drawing attention to the hand. It is much better to use a positive picture, like that of your other hand moving the glass. Such pictures are also self-fulfilling. The idea is quite simple: Misdirection must be attention directed *toward* something, not away from something, and positive images are the way to achieve this. Directing attention *from* is a hopeless and virtually impossible approach. The moment you start trying to *misdirect*, the battle is lost!

It would be far better for us if misdirection had not become an accepted term in magic, and direction had been adopted instead. Alas, misdirection long ago became so common a term, I don't

think we'll ever be able to replace it by direction. Well, you're right. That is very negative thinking on my part. Okay, YES, we will be able to replace the word *misdirection* with the more precise word *direction*.

SOMETHING OF INTEREST

The above makes clear that for our secret moves to avoid unwanted attention we must direct attention toward something else. From this it follows that we must have something else available at those times, something of interest. The more interesting this certain something is, the easier it will be to focus attention on it. The next time you wish to hide something, don't think of hiding it, but rather think of what you can offer of interest in its place. Preferably this should be something thoroughly intriguing.

The concept of offering something of greater interest is, although simple, an important and essential step in hiding your secrets. I believe it is ignorance of this concept that has caused many magicians to fail in what they thought was misdirection. Presenting something of greater interest that attracts attention, rather than trying to direct attention away from your secret, is a much more dependable way to protect that secret. This is a key concept, and if it hasn't already become an automatic part of your thinking, making it one could well be the single most productive step you can take toward a more successful use of attention control. Many know this concept; some even apply it. However it is so easy to forget, because it is so simple. It is like the gasoline in your car: Without it you will not get far. You *must* have something of interest to offer.

While the importance of this concept cannot be emphasized enough, it is nevertheless only the first step in hiding your secrets. There is another well-known but often ignored principle,

a major principle that has many other benefits: “continuous direction.”

CONTINUOUS DIRECTION

In legitimate theater, techniques for directing attention are constantly used. Not, of course, to hide a multitude of little secrets; no, these techniques are used to present the story in a clear and uncluttered manner. No matter what you perform, there will always be countless little things that are there out of necessity, though they bear no importance to the plot or idea presented. Many things must happen to get the story across effectively, but it isn't important for the audience to perceive those things, because they simply aren't significant to the plot. For an audience to follow the story, you don't want to bother them with details of stagecraft; you want only to impress on them those elements that matter – nothing more, nothing less.

When we perform as magicians, our job consists of more than simply hiding the secret. That is just a small part of our objective. Much more important is that we highlight the important details, those things that are necessary if the audience is to understand and follow the action and its intended meaning. You should be giving your spectators an uncluttered impression of the effect. We want to enhance the most interesting and important points, to paint a clear picture in the spectators' minds. Only then can they appreciate what we are trying to convey to them. Simply stated, we must present our work in a clear and efficient way if it is to be effective.

To do this, it is necessary for us to point out only the important details, to display them, to throw a strong light on them. It is only logical that we should direct the audience's attention continuously, from one important point to the next. If this isn't done, attention may stray to something unimportant, which may

complicate or confuse the information the audience receives. Therefore, from the first moment of our work to the last, the instant an important point has been digested by the spectators, the next important point should be presented to them, all without the intrusion of clutter and unimportant detail.

Continuous direction is essential if we are to create sound theater; we can't do without it. Since magic is theater as well, it needs continuous direction as much as any other theatrical form. With continuous direction we control the attention of the audience, focusing where we want it by presenting a series of important and relevant ideas and occurrences.

BELIEVING IN YOUR OWN MAGIC

Often I've read advice in our books that one should forget the sleight or gimmick. The best way to use a thumb tip? "Just forget that it is on your thumb!" Afraid of palming a card? "Forget that you have it palmed!"

Now, this advice certainly seems valid. It might be very beneficial if you could forget you are doing a sleight or forget that thumb tip on your thumb. But this advice doesn't offer much real help, does it? It instructs that you consciously forget! How on earth does one do that, forget on purpose? Just one attempt will be enough to convince you that such a thing is impossible!

However, this laudable but impossible idea of forgetting provides an excellent case for the practice of structuring your performances as a string of highlights. Focus attention on something other than the secret and the audience will pay no attention to the secret—but just as importantly, it correctly directs your attention as well!

One cannot purposefully forget, but you can substitute one thought for another. If you don't want to think of something,

think of something else! The trick is not to forget the thumb tip; the trick is to think of something else while you wear the thumb tip. And if there is a strong point of interest, you can place your interest there as well.

It can and should be so strong a point that it will make you think of the important and relevant features of presentation, the highlights only; and this makes it impossible for distracting thoughts concerning method to enter your mind. Your conscious mind is completely occupied with the important aspects of the effect. No place is left in it for you to think about the secret; and the secret is pushed into the shade of your subconscious mind. When you do this, you can deceive yourself!

Of course, it takes practice. You might not succeed the first time you try (at home); but if you really concentrate, if you force yourself while practicing to think only about the highlights of the presentation, soon thoughts concerning method will slip into the safe darkness of your subconscious. You simply won't have time to think about sleights and gimmicks, as your thoughts will be too engaged for such things.

To learn to believe your own magic, apart from good direction you will need a solid "silent script." The silent script, a basic acting tool, is well described by Henning Nelms in *Magic and Showmanship*. A silent script correctly grounds your acting. While it is formally an acting tool, it also helps you to avoid undesirable thoughts concerning method.

This idea of replacing certain thoughts with others may sound a bit mystical at first, but it is practical and not particularly difficult. However, it isn't automatic. It must be practiced. Otherwise, when you execute some secret action, before you know it, a thought about this action will appear in your mind. But if you practice, while seriously concentrating, to supplant such

thoughts with presentational ones, eventually the divorcing of secret actions from thoughts about them will become easier and easier. And eventually this detachment from method will work for you during actual performances as well. You must, though, stick to your silent script during practice. If you attempt to use a silent script only during your shows you will have trouble. Only thorough practice with the silent script will produce the desired results. From this you will see that there must be not only *continuous direction*, but *continuous thinking* as well!

Tommy Wonder

The Books of Wonder

1996

We return once more in this section to Maestro Ascanio, who picks up where Tommy Wonder left off in our discussion of misdirection (sorry, Tommy, I meant Direction). Ascanio coined the term "In-Transit Action," and here he takes us through his most famous insight into magic theory. This specific technique incorporates all three elements he outlined previously, and puts them to harmonious work: timing, misdirection, and technique.

IN-TRANSIT ACTIONS

BY ARTURO DE ASCANIO

This is where I've discovered (not invented) a generic category of secondary actions that, as such, serve to create a coordinated cover for secret actions. I have called them in-transit actions.

In-transit actions are those that are done in passing, and are required for the completion of a more important main action. Let's say a man wants to take a pack of cigarettes out of his right pocket but his right hand is holding an ordinary object such as a pen. In order to take the pack of cigarettes, he needs his right hand free. Therefore, in order to take the cigarettes (in-transit to the action of taking them) he transfers the pen to his left hand so his free right hand can enter the pocket and take out the cigarettes.

The spectator only sees the main action (taking out the cigarettes) because the in-transit action of transferring the pen to the other hand is so taken for granted and so embedded in the main act that it, by itself, has no interest whatsoever.

Countless details in this in-transit action, such as turning the pen end for end or taking it one way or another in the left hand, would go unnoticed for the same reason.

ELEMENTS OF IN-TRANSIT ACTIONS

We can already conclude, that in-transit actions combine the following elements:

A final action that appears as the main one. That's the action that gives meaning to the whole group of gestures that come before and after, thus converting them into the preliminaries and the result of the main action. This final action, needless to say, must not be a secret one. It should be an honest action that is not related to the result of the trick.

A secondary action, which is done as a mere procedural step towards completion of the main action. This is the in-transit action proper. The gesture that embodies it must not have a meaning by itself. This action should be simple, brief and inconspicuous. It is during this action that the secret action takes place.

A manifestation, however subtle, of the fact that the performer's intention is to execute the main action. I think this is the most important element because it's the magician's attitude that makes some gestures seem important while others are perceived merely as secondary, routine gestures.

Arturo de Ascanio
The Magic of Ascanio
2005

"AN OUNCE OF PRACTICE IS
WORTH MORE THAN TONS
OF PREACHING."

-MAHATMA GANDHI

Ascanio spoke of three elements: timing, misdirection, and technique. In this section, we have covered timing and misdirection in great detail. All that remains is a thorough discussion on technique, and there is no magician alive more qualified to speak on the subject than John Carney.

Carney achieved excellence in magic by focused practicing. And this is no surprise. Aristotle wrote, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit."

Yet practice is an art unto itself. Everyone tells us to "practice," but nobody tells us how. Until now.

PRACTICE AND TECHNIQUE

BY JOHN CARNEY

From the beginning, we have heard that the three rules of magic are: Practice, Practice, Practice. But what does practice entail? How do we approach it? How do we know we are practicing correctly? How can we get the most from our practice?

Practice is more than just a matter of getting through the allotted time without dropping anything or losing your place. Practice is more than repetition, more than memorizing a sequence, or mastering a particular sleight.

In a nutshell, progress comes from *being constructively critical of your work and making adjustments*.

Magicians often speak of technique. But what is it, and what makes for good technique? How do you acquire it? The dictionary defines technique as “technical skill; ability to apply procedures or methods so as to effect a desired result.” That means paying attention, “even to trifles,” with experiments yielding countless tiny adjustments until we get the desired result.

The whole is greater than the sum of the details. Good technique is achieving a consistent technical outcome. First let me categorize what I feel are the stages of practice:

THOUGHTFUL PRACTICE

Let's assume you are trying to learn a card move. First, you study the finger positions and make sure they are correct. Now you will make adjustments, holding the cards higher, lower, tighter, looser, more forward or back, this angle and that. If you discover a more effective approach, or come up with one yourself by all means, exploit it. But make sure the change is justified and not just ego-gratification.

Pick a subject, any subject, pick one you feel you've mastered, and try to make an improvement. The good magician looks for problems to solve while the hack always says it is "good enough."

Take the double lift, for instance. Simple, basic you say? It may be considered an "easy" move, but it is also one of the most abused and poorly executed. Think, how to get the break in an unsuspecting manner? How can you match the real action? How do you replace the double card? I guarantee that if you spend at least an hour thinking about this, you will come away with something useful.

Why does it make noise, and how can it be prevented? What are the bad angels, and how may I cover them? This is thoughtful practice: analyzing, experimentation and adjustment.

MECHANICAL PRACTICE

Now, once you have settled on an approach, you need to get in as many repetitions as you can. Practice the same thing over and over. Practice in long sessions and in short bursts. Pick up

the props throughout the day and get some practice in while you can. You can even turn on the TV or chat on the phone while you play with your props. This relentless repetition is to establish what is called “motor memory,” training the fingers to work independently from thought. The mind commands, and the fingers “react,” without any further ado. This is mechanical practice.

Now, take a look at the move again, Think through every aspect that occurs to you. Does it still make noise when executed? Does it brush? Why? Now the thoughtful practice begins again. Back and forth it goes, mechanical and thoughtful.

When are you finished? Well, never. Maybe you might find something that satisfies you for a while, but if you’re looking for answers, you will be back on the trail again, soon enough.

REHEARSAL

Rehearsal is a whole other beast. Typically, our rehearsal sessions lack focus. We are often distracted by other possibilities, props, ideas, and techniques – not to mention ringing phones and people coming and going in our space. Eventually, when we appear on stage, we haven’t had the experience of “performing” the routine before, and are less likely to feel comfortable.

A focused rehearsal can provide you with a realistic experience. It is said that the subconscious cannot distinguish between a real experience and one vividly imagined in detail. Effective rehearsal can give us the virtual experience of a real performance, within the familiar and comfortable structure that it provides.

Only after you feel that you have the technical requirements to a satisfactory degree, are you ready to start rehearsing, As you begin, you will stop and start, make notes, and begin again, Be

alert, and make note of what could go wrong, and consider how to prevent a recurrence.

As your rehearsals progress, you will eventually need to go from beginning to end without stopping, as you would in actual performance. Rehearsal is working at full performance energy level, imaging an audience in front of you.

Let's begin our rehearsal, We will assume at this point that you have written and refined at least a working script, along with the action that will follow as you speak. Clear an area and set a realistic stage environment, with your tables and props placed as they would be in performance. This will dictate where you will stand and walk, eliminating any awkwardness.

Don't whisper your lines as if going over it in your mind. You must project, not only to condition yourself for performance, but also to try out different wording, inflections, and timings of your script, and polish the overall delivery. Make note of awkward passages and rewrite them later, so they are more clear and concise. A rhythm can, and should develop, which will eventually make memorization a bit easier. But remember to stay loose enough that you may experiment with different deliveries and allow room for improvisation, taking advantage of whatever may occur in performance.

I admit to being a bit embarrassed rehearsing out loud. To eliminate some self-consciousness, I make sure my doors and windows are closed so the neighbors don't think I've gone completely off the deep end!

One of my techniques for memorizing lines is to record my full script with brief descriptions of the action. I then download the recording to my iPod and go for long walks. As the recording plays, I try to stay one or two seconds ahead of what I am

listening to. At first, this may seem difficult, but eventually, as you learn your lines, it becomes easier. When I miss a line, or use the wrong word or phrasing, I run the recording back a few seconds and drive that correction home.

When I feel I have absorbed it, I continue with the rest of the script. If I make significant changes to the script, I might re-record the script with those changes. This does not mean that I won't change the inflection or delivery of lines in performance, but the intent and the core of my meaning is clearly set.

Recording a brief description of your blocking is also very helpful, as when you move to this side of the stage, or reach for that prop, your muscle memory will help you recall what lines go with those actions.

Your final dress rehearsals should include just that, the very clothes that you will wear in your show. You can practice the Cups and Balls in your jeans, but when you are backstage in your dress suit, waiting to go on, you might discover your pocket too small to hold the loads, or no back pocket at all. Let's just say, I've been there!

Managing your props can also be tricky business. Sometimes I will practice two different routines separately, and make the mistake of never practicing them together. When I try the new sequence in my show, I am sometimes surprised to find that the gimmick I need is swirled around in my pocket with other props, or the pocket is full and there is no room for me to smoothly ditch or steal a gimmick.

Faucet Ross recommended to me that instead of the typical stop/start type of rehearsal, I should set my props for a dozen performances. Let's say that you are rehearsing vanishing a dollar bill, which will be found inside a lemon. Get twelve

lemons, tear the comer off twelve bills, and load them into the lemons. Perhaps use a pin to hold the extra comer to its corresponding loaded lemon to avoid mix-ups. Have a knife, plate, handkerchief and every incidental prop on hand.

Now go through the routine twelve times at full energy as if there were really an audience before you. Every time you drop something or something peeled occurs, make a mental note of it. Cover it as best you can, but don't stop. Try to keep the flow of performance going. After all, you are performing in front of an audience, right?

When you have finished, take your bow, then quickly arrange and reset your props and immediately start in again, at full energy. Make a quick note if you must, but don't lose your performance focus or frame of mind. Remember what you learn so you needn't make these same mistakes again.

Are a dozen rehearsals enough? Well, no. But this concentrated, focused rehearsal is an excellent start.

How much is enough? When you haven't the slightest hesitation, thinking what word or action comes next. Even then, if you skip a day or two, you will most likely find a few little glitches that need polishing. It's always good to run through things prior to a performance, running your lines, and going through the handling, to get yourself back up to speed.

This process is also an excellent method to generate new lines and bits of business, and to prepare you for almost any contingency. The confidence that results is the beginning of what we refer to as "stage presence."

Mike Skinner had a well-deserved reputation for having an enormous repertoire. You might find his rehearsal method

interesting. Michael always kept five or ten cue cards in his wallet. In very tiny writing, there were two columns of about twenty entries on each side of the card. This was his working repertoire! If you were sessioning with Michael, he might hand you the list, and you could pick any one of the hundred or so routines on the cards. No matter what you picked, Michael had finessed and rehearsed the routine within a week or two. No excuses, he was always at the top of his game with every trick.

Mike would take at least an hour a day to sit down and concentrate on two or three things from the list. If he went out for breakfast alone, he might practice a few things from his list while he was waiting for his meal.

It's important to understand that this was long after Mike had become accomplished with these routines. Mike never stopped growing or improving.

With each practice session, he would look at each routine with fresh eyes, and analyze it, looking for ways to improve the technique, the presentation or the routining. He would look for little bits of business he could incorporate, or little lines he could add. He looked for ways to cover his sleights and how to "get in," and "get out," of everything.

The next day, he would move down to the next two or three tricks, until he had gone through the entire list. When he reached the end, he would begin again at the top of the list. Is it any wonder why Skinner was so great?

John Carney
Magic by Design
2009

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Let's return once more to the sage advice of Darwin Ortiz, who offers yet another applicable strategy for technique: manipulating the way actions in a trick are remembered.

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MANIPULATING MEMORY

BY DARWIN ORTIZ

“Memory can change the shape of a room; it can change the color of a car. And memories can be distorted. They’re just an interpretation, not a record of events.”

—Leonard Shelby in *Memento*

“The true art of memory is the art of attention.”

—Samuel Johnson

When I was in law school I made extra money by working as an instructor in Harry Lorayne’s Memory School. One entire lesson was devoted to dealing with the problem of absentmindedness. The great insight I gained from teaching that particular class was that a memory system is virtually useless in fighting absentmindedness (as Harry’s own legendary absentmindedness illustrates). The reason is that absentmindedness is not about memory, it’s about attention.

As you’re jotting down some notes, the phone rings. You put down the pen to answer it. At that moment, you’re not thinking about the pen; you’re thinking about the phone. Putting down the pen is simply an automatic, unconscious action that is an incidental step in performing the action your mind is really focused on: answering the telephone.

After you get off the phone, you think, “Where did I put that pen?” After wracking your brain for a while you may wonder, “Why can’t I remember where I put the pen?” The answer is that memory is about retrieving information that you mentally filed away. If you never filed it away, you’ll never be able to retrieve it. If you weren’t paying attention to what you were doing when you put down the pen, the information was never encoded in your memory banks. A mental search will turn up nothing. This is exactly the phenomenon we’re going to try to create *in the spectator’s mind*.

This leads us to an important concept, that of *psychological invisibility*. Sleight-of-hand technique can make something literally invisible. If you execute the Scarne card fold well, the eye cannot see you do it. Physical misdirection can make something literally invisible. If they’re looking at Point A, they won’t see what you do at point B. Psychological invisibility is another matter. It refers to *anything that the eye sees but the mind does not register*- This is our goal, to keep certain actions from going into the spectators long-term memory banks.

People tend to remember what they consider important and forget what they consider unimportant. This leads us to a major goal of effect design: *make the important elements seem unimportant and the unimportant elements seem important*. The unimportant is forgettable and hence immediately forgotten. It is, in effect, edited out.

People unconsciously classify actions as important or unimportant based, not on the action itself, but rather on what they perceive to be the motivation behind that action. If they perceive the motivation to be unimportant, they will classify the action as unimportant. If they perceive the motivation to be irrelevant to the matter at hand, they will consider the

action irrelevant. That's why an important key to manipulating memory is the use of false motivations.

THE FALLACY OF DEEP MOTIVATION

"All forms of misinterpretation must occur before the spectators notice anything odd and begin to wonder about it. Once curiosity is aroused, it is hard to satisfy—even when the explanation is genuine."

—Henning Nelms, *Magic and Showmanship*

Magicians often complain that some action in an effect is not logical. When magicians say that an action is not logical, they usually mean that it's not *motivated*. Believing that motivation has to be logical is what leads to the fallacy of deep motivation. In fact, a motivation can be highly illogical yet completely effective. This is because the roots of effective motivation are not logical but psychological.

While every action in an effect should be properly motivated, in most cases that motivation doesn't have to run deep. That is to say, the motivation needn't be capable of withstanding twenty minutes of rigorous analysis. If the audience feels impelled to analyze why you did something, you've already lost the battle. The purpose of motivating an action is precisely to keep the audience from analyzing it.

Many film critics have pointed out that the plots of Alfred Hitchcock's movies don't make much sense when you analyze them. The flaws are precisely in the area of motivation. "Why did the protagonist do this? Why didn't he just do that instead? It would have been more logical." But, even Hitchcock's severest critics admit that these questions never occur to you while you're watching the movie. Carried along by the story, you accept everything as logical at the time. The Master of Suspense understood that, if your goal is entertainment, a character's

motivation doesn't have to make sense. It just has to *seem* to make sense.

Like Hitchcock's audiences, your audience wants to know what's going to happen next. They'll accept anything plausible that moves the effect forward. In fact, magicians have it easier than Hitchcock did. Film critics and serious film buffs will watch a movie repeatedly and ruminate over it. As a result, they may find logical flaws to pick apart. The spectator only gets to see the trick once. And, having just witnessed a miracle, he will be thinking along completely different lines. He will be asking himself "*How?*" not "*Why?*" If the motivations for your actions made sense to him at the time, he won't question them in retrospect.

Even magicians, when watching an effect, will accept illogical but plausible motivations at face value. It's only when they're learning an effect that, plagued by insecurity, they'll think, "Gee; this isn't logical, if you think about it."

Of course, there is nothing wrong with making an action completely logical as long as it doesn't involve labored explanations, additional handling, or anything else that slows down the pace of the effect. It's important, however, to understand the real purpose of motivating critical actions. Your goal is not to make the action logically unassailable, but to make it psychologically invisible.

To achieve this, your actions don't require deep motivation. They just require obvious motivation. Your actions need to make sense in a self-evident way at the moment you perform them. This will guarantee that the spectators will have no reason to analyze the big picture. Your motivations don't have to be able to withstand your audience's critical faculties. They have to avoid awakening those critical faculties.

A simple example should clarify this distinction between obvious motivation and deep motivation. In my version of the Travelers plot (called, coincidentally, Hitchcock Travelers), I take out a pen to have a spectator sign the four aces. When she finishes, I place the pen in my pocket. I then have four cards selected and lost in the deck. At that point I take out the pen and place it across the tabled aces as a paperweight. This action has a secret purpose. In removing the pen I load a palmed ace into my pocket.

I need to go to my pocket to load the ace, and removing the pen provides the motivation.

It could be argued that it doesn't make sense to put the pen away if I'm going to need it later. Since I must have performed this effect many times, I must know that I'll need the pen again. All of this is true and none of it matters. When I put the pen away, the action makes sense since the spectator is finished with it. The audience understands why I do it and forgets the action almost instantly. When I later take the pen out, the action makes sense since I need it to pin down the aces. The audience understands why I do it and forgets the action almost instantly.

The time delay between putting the pen away and taking it out again prevents the audience from putting the pieces together and noticing the illogicality. If I were to put the pen away only to take it out again ten seconds later that would indeed look odd. It would be easy for people to see the big picture. That's the key. In order for an audience to analyze your motivations deeply, they would have to step back and contemplate the big picture. They're not going to do that. If they're inclined to do any contemplating after the effect, the question they'll contemplate is, "How on earth did those aces get out from under that pen and into his pockets?" Even if, after the fact, they did try to look at the big picture, they wouldn't remember your incidental actions

with the pen because, at the time that you did them, they were psychologically invisible.

Mistakenly thinking that every little action requires deep motivation tends to produce labored procedures, long-winded presentations, endless patter rationales, and a generally bloated effect. Keep the motivations simple and obvious and you'll keep the methodology below the spectator's radar.

Finally, keep in mind that these comments relate specifically to effect design. There are many other issues of motivation that relate to presentation. In particular, your actions must make sense in terms of a presentation's dramatic premise. I discussed these sorts of things in *Strong Magic*. My comments here relate to what we're discussing here, how motivation can help make an action psychologically invisible.

TELEGRAPHING MOTIVATION

"A motivation must be made clear before you perform the action which it explains. ..when the explanation is offered beforehand, no one is sufficiently interested to examine it closely."

—Henning Nelms, *Magic and Showmanship*

"Anticipated action is viewed with less suspicion"

—John Carney, *Carneycopia*

In magic, the most suspicious reason for doing something is *no reason at all*. If the audience doesn't detect a reason for an action they'll search for an ulterior motive. This search brings with it the two things we're most trying to avoid: attention and suspicion.

Whenever possible, the motivation for an action should be apparent to the audience at the time of the action. Ideally, it

should be apparent a moment before the action. Thus, the audience is psychologically prepared to dismiss the action even before you've performed it.

An audience dismisses an action at the moment that they understand the reason for it, not a second before. If the motivation for the action becomes apparent a moment after you've performed it, they may well dismiss the action a moment after you've performed it. By that point, however, they've already taken note of that action. It's gone into their memory bank. Our ideal goal is for them not to take note of the action at all. Having the audience notice an action and then dismiss it is good. Having them not notice the action because they dismissed it even as you were starting to do it is better.

Suppose you have to go to your pocket to ditch a palmed object. You may motivate this action by openly placing something in your pocket or by openly removing something from your pocket. From the standpoint of psychological invisibility, going to your pocket to put something away is better than going to your pocket to take something out. When you put something in your pocket, the motivation is apparent before your hand has even reached the pocket. When you take something out, the motivation only becomes apparent as your hand emerges with the object.

When the only practical option for covering a trip to the pocket is removing an object, it's a good idea to telegraph the action in advance. You might, for example, say, "We're going to need a pen for this." When, a moment later you go to your pocket, the audience understands, even before your hand reaches it, that you're going to take out a pen. Thus, their understanding of the motivation for the action precedes the action itself.

Let's take a concrete example of telegraphing motivation. In *The Quick and the Dead* from *Scams & Fantasies with Cards*, I use the old idea of loading a palmed card into my pants pocket under cover of pushing in the lining of the pocket. At the beginning of the effect I remove whatever I have in the pocket and pull out the lining to show it empty. I leave the lining hanging out as I continue the effect. My jacket covers the reversed pocket, so the audience forgets the condition of the pocket and so apparently, do I.

Later (after I've palmed a card) I pull back my jacket, glance down, and notice that the pocket is still inside out. The audience, of course, notices the same thing at the same moment. Even as my hand swings down to push the lining back in, the audience has already registered that I'm simply going to do what I forgot to do before. Even before I finish the action, I turn my attention to the assisting spectator and start to give him instructions. Even before I finish the action, the audience turns their attention to what I'm saying to the spectator. Neither my audience nor I have time to dwell on unimportant matters. (What I instruct the spectator to do is to shuffle the deck. I make this seem important. In fact, it's unimportant since the selected card is no longer in the deck. It's in my pocket, placed there by an important action made to seem unimportant.)

RUSES

When it comes to false motivations, a valuable concept is that of the ruse. In *Magic by Misdirection*, Dariel Fitzkee defines a ruse as, a plausible, but untrue, reason, or action conveying a reason, for concealing the true purpose for doing something." In other words, the audience sees what you do. They're only misled as to why you do it. This leads them to misconstrue the importance of the action. We'll now analyze three of the most valuable categories of ruses: the incidental, the accidental, and the extraneous.

INCIDENTAL ACTIONS

“Actions that appear necessary but unimportant are only half-noticed and soon forgotten. Actions that are unnecessary arouse suspicion.”

—Al Baker, *Pet Secrets*

Perhaps the epitome of actions that appear necessary but unimportant are what Ascanio termed in-transit actions. Suppose that, during a performance, I’m holding a deck of cards in my right hand and transfer it to my left hand. If you were to ask the audience what I had just done, everyone would say that I had shifted the deck from one hand to the other. Suppose again that I’m holding a deck of cards in my right hand. This time, however, I scratch my right ear with my right hand. In order to do so, I first transfer the deck to my left hand. If you were to ask the audience what I has just done, everyone would say that I scratched my ear. No one would even mention the deck of cards. Transferring the deck from one hand to the other became *psychologically invisible*.

The reason is simple. People interpret actions in terms of their end goal. They don’t bother to note—let alone remember—each trivial step on the way to that goal. The in-transit action is the incidental act that has to be gotten out of the way in order to perform the target act. In our example, gifting the deck to the other hand is just something I have to do in order to scratch my ear.

Think back to my initial example of the lost pen. You put down the pen to answer the phone. Later you can’t remember where you put it. This is an everyday occurrence that has happened to all of us. The reason we don’t remember where we put the pen is that putting down the pen was an in-transit action performed solely to achieve the target act of picking up the phone. Even when you’re the one performing the actions, in-transit actions tend to be forgotten. (More precisely, they tend not to be noticed

in the first place.) What works on you will work on your audience.

An in-transit action achieves both of Al Baker's goals. First, it provides motivation. It makes it clear that the action is a necessary step in order to achieve the end goal. Second, it minimizes the action's significance. It makes clear that the end goal is the important thing. What happens in transit to that goal is unimportant. The spotlight is on the target act. The in-transit action happens in its shadow.

Here is a three-step formula for applying the in-transit action concept to make key elements of the method psychologically invisible. First, identify an element that is important to the method but unimportant to the effect. Second, find an action that is important to the effect (or can be made to seem so) but unimportant to the method. Third, find a way to perform the first action in transit to the second action.

Admittedly, this may sound a little vague when stated in general terms. A couple of examples should help. In "The New Hitchcock Aces" (*Cardshark*), at one point I have three aces in my right hand. The deck is in my left hand and the fourth ace is face down on the table. I have to place the three aces on the deck in order to switch them. To do so unmotivated would ignore Al Baker's warning that, "Actions that are unnecessary arouse suspicion." Instead I use the three aces to flip the tabled ace face up. (This is a logical action in the context of the effect). However, when I flip the ace over, it falls too far to the left, so I slide it back to its original position. In order to do so, I have to first free my right hand. I do that by placing the three aces on top of the deck. Thus, an action that is important in the inner reality of the method (placing the aces on the deck) becomes unimportant in the outer reality of the effect because it's just an

action performed in-transit to the target action of repositioning the tabled ace.

A similar situation arises in “The Color Of Money” (*Scams & Fantasies with Cards*), my version of the Follow the Leader plot. Early in the trick the red packet and the black packet must be brought in contact to effect a transfer of cards. Since contiguity is one of the great clues to method, I wanted to make this momentary contact psychologically invisible. Here is how I did it.

I use two casino chips, one red and one black, to mark the positions of the two packets. The black packet is in my left hand. The red packet is on the table to my left. My right hand removes the two chips from my pocket. I drop the black one on the table to my right. While looking at the audience, I start to table the red chip to my left. At the last moment, I look down and notice that the red packet is in the way. Therefore, my left hand turns palm down and picks up the red packet under the cards it already holds. My right hand then drops the red chip where the packet was. The two packets in my hand are then placed in their proper positions, the secret transfer having been accomplished.

This sequence deceives because I’m not concerned with the cards. I’m concerned with the chip. I want to place it in the correct position. Picking up the packet and putting it down again are incidental actions needed to make room for the chip. Thus, bringing the packets together (which is important to the method) becomes unimportant to the effect while properly positioning the chip (which is unimportant to the method) is made to seem important to the effect. A moment later, the audience will no more remember the packets touching than they would remember my transferring the deck from one hand to the other to scratch my ear.

Finally, here is an example that also illustrates another issue I've already raised. At the end of *Museum Piece (Cardshark)*, I clean up by switching the packet I've been using for a group of cards on top of the deck. I use Marlo's visual retention switch. This involves clipping the packet against the deck with the left thumb, then tossing it on the table. As the name indicates, the move is visually very illusive. To be *psychologically* illusive, however, you need to first motivate placing the packet on the deck and then motivate tossing it on the table.

Here is how I do it. My left hand holds the deck and my right hand holds the packet. I want to pick up the card box to put the deck away. So I clip the packet under my left thumb to free my other hand to pick up the box (In that action, I execute the switch.) Both clipping the packet under my left thumb and dropping it on the table happen in-transit to the end goal of putting the deck in the box. The packet switch thereby fools the mind as well as the eye.

My reason for bringing up this last example is that the motivation makes no sense if you analyze it. Why not just drop the packet from my right hand to the table in the first place? This logical hole becomes apparent the moment you start to analyze the big picture. This fact, however, simply doesn't matter. No spectator is ever going to engage in such an analysis. The psychological persuasiveness of each motivation *at the moment that it happens* forestalls any further thought.

ACCIDENTAL ACTIONS

One of the problems we magicians must contend with is that people are always looking for ulterior motives in everything we say or do. (To make matters worse, they're usually right. Almost everything we say or in a performance does have an ulterior motive.) Accidental actions are, however, exempt from

this suspicion because they are, after all, accidental. I therefore take them at face value.

To illustrate how effectively “mistakes” can motivate necessary actions, I provide a few examples from my own repertoire. I know that these examples work because I’ve used them countless times.

In “The Hitchcock Travelers” (*Scams & Fantasies*), I use a beautiful ploy of Ed Marlo’s to produce the last ace. The effect of the Travelers plot is that four signed aces travel to four different pockets. In my version, two of the aces are loaded into the same pocket. But, thanks to Mario, they are still produced from different pockets.

I pull the first ace out of my inner left jacket pocket (which also contains a second ace). I now remove an ace from my left pants pocket. Next I remove an ace from my right pants pocket. I then reach into my inner left jacket pocket (the same one that the first ace came out of). My face registers mild annoyance as I realize that I’ve gone to the wrong pocket. I finish by removing the last ace from my inner right jacket pocket. In fact, by means of a beautifully choreographed sequence of Mario’s, I’ve secretly transferred the last ace from one pocket to another. But, as good as the handling is, it deceives only because the audience is convinced that reaching into the wrong pocket was an honest mistake.

I’d be willing to bet that no layperson describing this effect to a friend would ever mention that I briefly reached into my inner left jacket pocket before removing the last ace from my inner right jacket pocket. That’s the real test. When people recount a magic effect, they mention the relevant details and leave out the irrelevant ones. A passing mistake falls in the latter category.

That's why using a mistake as a motivation can advance our goal of making the important seem unimportant.

In "Maximum Risk" from *Scams & Fantasies*, after the spectator has peeked at a card, I deal the deck into two piles. In order for the trick to work, however, the selection must first be repositioned. I must transfer a certain number of cards from the top of the deck to the bottom. Yet, any suggestion that I'm attempting to reposition the selection would spoil the effect. Cutting or shuffling, no matter how artfully done, would fail because they are so obviously deliberate actions. Alternatively, using a pass would require executing the move at the worst possible time.

The solution I settled on was to accomplish the displacement under cover of a mistake. I start to deal the cards into two piles. Suddenly I realize that I forgot to take out the money for the wager I had earlier offered to make. I casually drop the deck on the dealt cards and place it aside as I take out my wallet. After the money is on the table, I pick up the deck and start dealing again. My "realization" is timed to occur right after I've dealt the number of cards that I need to displace. Dropping the deck on these cards accomplishes my goal.

From the audience's viewpoint, forgetting to take out the money wasn't part of the trick. If it's not part of the trick, it can't be part of the method. Everything about how I handle this says, "That part didn't count. Now we're starting for real." The false start simply isn't worth remembering. It won't be remembered when the spectators later search for a solution to the mystery.

It is best, however, to use mistakes as motivations sparingly. First, if you use this type of ruse too often it can become obvious. Second, you can come across as the kind of performer who makes a lot of mistakes.

This may not be desirable unless it ties in with the persona you're trying to project. (Juan Tamariz makes frequent potent use of "mistakes" precisely because of the image he is promoting.) Used strategically, however, the "mistake" is an extraordinarily effective technique for making actions psychologically invisible. People judge actions by their intentions. By definition, a mistake is unintentional. That makes it unimportant and guarantees that it will be unremembered.

EXTRANEOUS ACTIONS

The reason audiences dismiss accidents from consideration is that they're unplanned. Since you must have planned how you would make the trick work, anything that's unplanned can't be related to how the trick works. If, however, the audience can be made to believe that an action, although planned, has nothing to do with the effect, they won't factor it in when trying to determine how the effect happened.

The prime example of such apparently extraneous actions in magic is the humorous gag. Any action associated with a gag is taken at face value because your motivation is so obvious: to get a laugh. There is no need for the audience to search any further for motivation. Additionally, getting a laugh has nothing to do with achieving the effect. Therefore, when the audience thinks back on the effect, the gag won't be part of the picture.

A while back I published an effect called The Big Bounce using the bounce/no bounce balls. At one point I make a hundred-dollar wager on the outcome. Under cover of the bill, I perform the necessary switch of the balls. I'm left, however, with a finger-palmed ball under the bill that I need to ditch. To do so, I start to place the hundred-dollar bill back in my pocket as I say, "Maybe you'd rather just play for fun." As soon as my fingertips enter the pocket, I allow the finger-palmed ball to roll into the pocket.

I immediately appear to register the spectator's disappointment and toss the bill on the table as I say, "I didn't think so." It's a mild enough joke but it gets a smile from the audience. Since the act of going to the pocket was just part of a joke, the audience forgets it a moment after I did it.

"The best example I've ever encountered of going to the pocket under cover of a gag is a brilliant bit from Jim Pace's "Miser's Dream" routine. As he produces coin after coin, at one point he looks at one and says, "This one's a Krugerrand. I think I'll keep that one." He then pockets the coin and goes on with the routine. What no one suspects is that, when he goes to his pocket, he comes out with another load of coins palmed. No suspicion attaches to his putting his hand in his pocket because it's just a joke. No one gives it another thought.

Since people tend to relax their attention when they laugh, gags provide a double-barreled cover. They provide motivation for the necessary action and they provide intensity misdirection in the form of the laugh.

Gags can not only solve small problems, but also motivate major handling elements. One of the most challenging plots in card magic is to place a card face down on the table, have a spectator name any card, and then show that the tabled card is the one they named. The big problem is the need to look through the deck after the spectator names a card in order to locate it. How do you keep the audience from realizing why you're searching through the deck? Larry Jennings has a version in *The Cardwright* called "First Impressions." In it, he does the searching under cover of a genuinely funny gag. No one ever suspects his real reason for looking through the cards because his apparent reason is so obvious, to get a laugh.

Roy Walton's Smiling Mule makes brilliant use of a gag to lead the audience to ignore the very handling that produces the magical result. I know from performing my own version, The Last Laugh from *Scams & Fantasies*, that when people later describe the effect to others, they don't even bother to mention the gag. For another example, go back to Chapter Four and check the subchapter on The Time Displacement Device. There you'll find a description of a pseudo-estimation effect that uses a simple gag to psychologically erase the key move in the effect. Finally, notice that each of these gags is amusing, but none is fall-out-of-your-chair hilarious. Ideally, we don't want the gag to be so funny as to be memorable. We're aiming for the opposite, something funny enough to be motivated, unfunny enough to be quickly forgotten.

ALTERING THE FINAL PICTURE

At the climax of an effect, there is a moment when the audience's grasp of the details of that climax is still fluid. The impression has not yet gelled. This can offer the performer a brief window of opportunity to mold the final impression to make it still stronger. This is possible because, at the climax of any really amazing effect, the spectators tend to turn inward to absorb it. (Often they also literally turn to each other, looking in each other's faces to see if the other person is affected the same way.) After a moment, they will again turn outward toward the performer. In the interval, you may be able to subtly improve the effect's final picture.

Juan Tamariz uses this idea when he performs the old Rising Card effect where the selection is on top and you secretly push it up with your forefinger. While the audience is reacting to the rise, he pulls the card the rest of the way out and reinserts it in the middle of the deck. He does it openly, but the audience hardly notices because of their state of mind at that instant. By

the time they refocus on the performer, he can show the deck from every angle, the card legitimately sticking out of the middle. That becomes the final picture in the audience's memory. That memory will block anyone from ever penetrating the secret of the effect.

I do a quick poker deal based on an idea shown to me by Roger Klause. I deal a head-up round of draw poker to myself and a spectator. Each of us clearly receives five cards. But, a moment later, when the spectators look up, I'm holding a large fan of cards. My poker hand has grown to about thirty-five cards.

This impression is partially created by some photo doctoring. I initially add about fifteen cards to my poker hand. (Much more than that would be risky, given the method.) I immediately fan these cards and wait for the spectators to look up at me. When they do, they react with surprise and laughter. I seize on that moment to add another fifteen cards or so to the poker hand and ribbonspread the cards on the table.

The method that I use for the second add-on is bold, but it simply doesn't matter. It happens in the moment that the audience unfocuses in reaction to the initial shock. By the time they refocus, the picture has changed. Of course, they are not conscious of any change in the number of card. However, as they calm down, this stable, clear picture of thirty-five cards is waiting for them. It's the one that gets locked into their minds, replacing the fuzzy image they saw for an instant before being thrown into shock.

This idea of altering the final picture is related to the concept of backward time displacement. However, here the notion is used, not to achieve the effect, but merely to enhance it. Admittedly, opportunities to apply this idea don't come along often. But, you have to be aware of the concept to seize them when they do.

FINAL POINTS

Remember that the goal of all ruses, whether incidental, accidental, or extraneous is to make important actions appear unimportant. Ideally, they will appear so unimportant as to keep them from being encoded into long term memory banks.

If you're unsure whether a particular ploy will do the job, ask yourself whether a layperson recounting the effect to someone else would bother mention the ruse handling in question. (For example, would he really have to mention that you had to move a packet of cards out of the way in order to drop a casino chip in its place?) If you're unsure of the answer, perform the effect for a layperson and then ask him to recount what you just did. If he doesn't bother to mention the ruse handling, you know that you've achieved your goal.

Finally, I want to stress that, as useful as these techniques of psychological invisibility are, I don't think that, by themselves, they're strong enough to form the basis for a powerful effect. Think of them as tools for putting the final polish on an effect that already rests on a sound foundation of time displacement, disguising proximity and correlation, and solid conceptual barriers. These techniques can add a further layer of deception to an already strong method, making it virtually bulletproof.

Darwin Ortiz

Designing Miracles

2006

We conclude our discussion of technique with a concept vital to the magician: the spectator's assumptions. We spent an entire chapter (Section Two, page 69) on thinking like a spectator. We build on those concepts here, as Michael Close explores seven assumptions spectators make when they view a magician. But now we take a step further, as Michael offers advice on how we might design our miracles with these erroneous assumptions in mind.

Creativity becomes slippery when you try to pin it down and describe how it works. I'm skeptical about most authors who claim to be able to teach it. Yet I have returned to this essay countless times in magical development, and reading through Close's "seven assumptions" often proves helpful when I am developing a method.

ASSUMPTIONS

BY MICHAEL CLOSE

Assumption lies at the heart of deception; in fact, I'm not sure deception can exist without it. When we perform, we offer sensory information to our spectators. Most often this is visual or aural information. The spectators process this information, and they make assumptions. Whether or not these assumptions become convictions depends on our skill in concealing the truth of the situation. Most of the time we lead the spectators toward the assumptions we wish them to draw:

I false shuffle a deck of cards. If the shuffle simulates a real shuffle, then the spectators will assume that the deck has been mixed. If I hand a prop out for examination, the spectators will assume that it must be free from guile, otherwise, why would I allow it to be examined?

Notice, however, that there are levels of assumption. We can destroy the benefits of assumption by overemphasis. If I draw attention to the shuffle, assumption becomes suspicion. If I say, "I have here an ordinary piece of rope," the same situation occurs. Assumption works best when we simply offer the information to the spectators without any undue emphasis. Another example: as I patter I undo the cellophane and break the seal on a deck of cards. This action is observed, and an assumption is reached: this is a brand new deck of cards.

Assumption is a vital tool to deception because spectators use their assumptions as the basis for attempting to unravel the method of a trick. If an assumption is false (and the spectators do not realize this), then any logical attempt to reconstruct a method is doomed to failure. As the spectators go through this process they may begin to doubt the validity of some of their assumptions. Most often these will be the assumptions that we over-emphasized. The more we can turn assumptions into convictions, the less the spectators will be able to doubt their validity, and the more likely we will be to achieve a result for which the only explanation is “magic.”

There is an aspect of assumption that intrigues me a great deal: are there assumptions that the spectators bring to a performance without even realizing they are doing so? If there are, and we could set up a situation where these assumptions were false, then we could produce profoundly amazing magic, because the spectators road to reconstruction would be headed in the wrong direction without them even realizing it. If the best assumptions are those that are under-emphasized by us, then having the spectators adopting a false assumption without us doing anything must be the most diabolical use of this tool.

But do such subconscious assumptions exist? Yes they do, and you are already aware of some of them, although you may not have considered them in this way. Before I give the list I have come up with, take a moment, close the book, and think about this: what kinds of tricks have methods that are absolutely impossible for the spectators to reconstruct (regardless of their analytical or observational powers)? There are two types that should be very familiar to you. They are the first two on my list. Please take a moment to consider this before you read on. You may come up with answers that differ from mine, and that would be great.

THIS IS THE WAY THE TRICK WORKS

First on my list is the “Unique Procedure” assumption. Spectators assume that the trick they are watching always proceeds the same way. The trick moves from point A to point B to point C, and if you watched repeated performances it would always do so. This is certainly a valid assumption. But what if the trick didn’t have a linear structure? What if we had multiple possible branches that we could take depending on certain circumstances? Reconstruction of the trick would be impossible, because not only was the spectators’ underlying assumption false, they didn’t even know that they had made this assumption.

The above situation occurs in any trick that involves “outs.” If we have more than one way to end a trick, then discovering the method becomes very difficult. The most famous multiple procedure effect is Dai Vernon’s *The Trick that Can’t be Explained*. In this routine we make a prediction and then we improvise a procedure for causing the spectator to arrive at the predicted card. If our improvisation is logical and convincing, then there is no explanation, since the only assumption made during the entire trick is subconscious and false.

I discovered that I have used the idea of multiple procedures in many of my routines, and in unobvious ways. The *Pothole Trick* uses an out. If you are familiar with the new ending to *Dr. Strangetrick* (explained on *Workers - The Video*) you may realize that whether or not you restore the card at the end is an out. Several of the effects in this volume concern multiple procedures; several of them involve placing the out somewhere other than the end of trick, which is where it normally occurs.

THE SHOW IS STARTING

A second assumption is the “This is The Beginning of the Show” assumption. When we walk out on stage, or when we walk up to the table, the spectators assume that we are beginning the show. But what if the show actually began earlier? Pre-show work preys on this assumption, and makes possible that defy explanation. After all, how can you begin to reconstruct a method if part of the show happened before you began to watch?

THE SHOW IS OVER

Closely related to the previous assumption is “The Trick is Over” assumption. When the climax of the trick is reached, the spectators assume that your work as a magician stops as well. But what if it doesn’t? In a well-constructed, multi-phased routine this assumption and the previous one work in tandem. What appears to be the end of a trick is not; it’s really the beginning of the next trick. And what appears to be the start of the next trick is not; for the trick actually began much earlier than was assumed. Check out Reverse Logic and Too Ahead to see how I exploit these assumptions.

Another way to use “The Trick is Over” assumption is to begin to cover our tracks at the end of a trick. We alter important data and distort memories. I don’t believe that this approach has been utilized to any great extent, and it is a fertile field for further exploration. A Trick for O’Brien is a simple application of this idea.

THE LONER

A fourth assumption is “The Magician Works Alone” assumption. This assumption is what makes the use of stooges effective. The spectators assume that the magician and the audience are on two different teams, and collusion is against the rules.

Some absolutely amazing effects are possible using secret helpers, but stooges are a double-edged sword. If the spectators begin to suspect that your audience helper is a stooge, then everything else you do loses credibility.

But it’s possible to use helpers who are not actually part of the show. In a restaurant, the waiters and waitresses can be invaluable assistants — especially when it comes to the next assumption.

WE JUST MET

The “No Prior Information” assumption is a valuable one to exploit, and it is related to the pre-show work idea explained above. When you walk up to a table of strangers to perform for them, they assume you have no prior information about them. But if you have used the waiters and waitresses as our secret eyes and ears, then you can accomplish some miraculous things. It is also possible to “scope out” a table furtively, and pick up information that can be used later on. Take a look at Fortune Sugar for an example of such an approach.

TOO MUCH TROUBLE

I think that spectators also unconsciously embrace the “Too Much Trouble” assumption. My postulate here is that most spectators think there is a limit to the amount of trouble someone would go to just to fool them. What brought me to this conclusion was the

few times when I have explained the memorized deck to laymen friends of mine. The thought that I would actually take the time to memorize the order of a deck of cards was inconceivable to them, consequently, such a method would never occur to them. I think another trick of this nature is Tommy Wonder's third method for the Nest of Boxes (explained in the *Books of Wonder*).

POLISHED PRESTIDIGITATION

My final example is "The Magician Doesn't Rehearse Mistakes" assumption. Spectators assume that a performer rehearses his effects in order to produce a smooth, polished performance, free from the tiny annoying screw-ups that plague us in everyday life. If a tiny, annoying screw-up occurs during a performance, it must be a genuine mistake, for why in the world would anyone purposely do such a thing? Since the spectators make this assumption subconsciously, we can exploit it to our advantage. An excellent example of this is Juan Tamariz's Double Crossing the Gaze Switch. The switch is based on a tiny, annoying screw-up: the performer has forgotten in which pocket he has placed a necessary prop. Responding to this mistake provides the cover for the switch. Miscalling cards is another example of how to exploit this assumption. (If some of this sounds familiar, it is because "The Magician Doesn't Rehearse Mistakes" assumption is the idea behind my corollary to the Too Perfect Theory. See Workers 3 for details.)

I should point out, though, that this assumption is very sensitive to overemphasis. A small screw-up can be convincing and believable. A major screw-up almost never is. ("Oh, my

goodness! I've accidentally burned up your twenty-dollar bill! Whatever will we do now!")

YOUR MISSION, SHOULD YOU DECIDE TO ACCEPT IT

I am positive I have only begun to scratch the surface of the possibilities available to us when we turn subconscious assumptions to our advantage. One of the big problems is discovering what these assumptions are. It's like analyzing your own breathing. Once you start to pay attention to it, it's no longer normal. But the more people who start thinking about this, the more examples that will be discovered, and the more powerful the magic that can be developed.

Sometimes the assumptions are not general, but are trick or move specific. I recently discovered a subconscious assumption that relates to the MC Spread Double Lift when it is used as a force. You can read about it (and a trick that I developed from it) in the chapter "On Sleights."

Unfortunately, theory does not excite magicians; tricks excite magicians. For that reason, most of the routines in this book use as their underlying method the exploitation of subconscious assumptions. I suggest that you learn a few of them, perform them for laymen, and observe the result. If they stoke your fires, we all may be embarking a new era of discovery.

Michael Close
Workers 5
1997

PART SEVEN



PRESENTATION

"ANY TRICK CAN BECOME A
MASTERPIECE, BUT IT HAS TO HAVE A
PRESENTATION THAT HOLDS PEOPLE
ENTHRALLED AND FASCINATED."

-DAI VERNON

David Regal poses a fundamental question to open our discussion on Presentation: he asks what qualities separate the greatest magicians from the rest? "This is not a detail," he warns, "this is it."

"Presentation" is an easy answer to the question, but let's dig deeper.

Presentation begins before we utter our first word or set up our first effect. Presentation is an attitude, an emotion. And although Mr. Regal humbly claims not to know the answer to the question he poses, we know that he knows more than he lets on. For him, the answers are a bit all-over-the-map. So, too, is his beautiful essay. Yet if you can find true north as you navigate the seemingly unconnected advice he offers, you will find yourself sitting very, very close to the answers you seek.

THE OTHER HALF

BY DAVID REGAL

How often have we seen two magicians, both equally proficient technically, get widely different reactions after performing the same effect?

Obviously, one performance was stronger than the other, but it is more accurate to say that what one performer did in front of an audience was *different* than what the other performer did. When the performer who garnered the stronger response performed, something different happened. The plot was different, the audience's level of interest was different, and the *happening* - the live event that occurred in front of the audience when the magic took place - was different. If this sounds like focusing on a "detail," it is not - this is not a detail, this is it. If one magician receives fifty percent of the response of another magician after performing the same trick, something is in need of improvement.

In the search for stronger presentations, it's important to discard platitudes and get down to the work that, when successful, can make a performance of a magic effect come to life. In my history of performing, such as it is, I've tried to keep my eyes open and

ask appropriate questions. As a result of this tireless quest, I have learned almost nothing.

The few things I *have* learned, however, I am happy to pass on:

ENJOY BEING THERE

If performing for others leaves you cold, your performances stand a good chance of leaving others cold. On the other hand, if you enjoy showing people a good time, and that pleasure is communicated to the audience, you will be adopted as a friend, and, in the tradition of friendships, forgiven missteps.

WHEN YOU DON'T ENJOY BEING THERE, PRETEND THAT YOU DO

On those days when it is impossible to enjoy the fact that people have paused to direct attention to whatever bit of silliness is coming out of your pockets, make every effort to feign pleasure. It is part of the job description. I recall once seeing a skilled and respected magician booked to perform for a mixed audience, adults and children. This magician despised children, and was unable to mask that fact. I was only able to remain in the rear of the room for the first minute of his act, as I was made uncomfortable by the hatred the audience felt for this man.

ESTABLISH A PREMISE

Just as a short story begins with a paragraph that sets a mood and establishes certain relevant facts, clarifying a premise at the beginning of a magic presentation is the foundation upon which an audience's response is built. Even surprise endings to effects are lessened without this, as they are only surprises in relation to what is expected. By beginning an effect with a communicative

statement such as, *“Coins are made of a combination of metals, and because of that, they’re unstable”...or... “They say love can move mountains. Let’s see if they’re right”...or... “I’d like to show you how to cheat your friends,”* we invite the audience into a performance, as opposed to letting them sit idly as we essentially lecture at them, while they try their best to make sense of our actions.

CLARIFY AND SIMPLIFY

How easily can people be confused? People can be confused by a Copper/Silver Transposition. There is no way to overstate the importance of clarifying the events leading up to an effect (the set-up), and simplifying the pertinent elements the audience must understand in order to appreciate the upcoming impossibility. A good example of these techniques can be found in the work of Tommy Wonder. I’ve seen magicians perform the Ambitious Card where the card comes to the top ten tunes to a smattering of applause at the conclusion. Tommy makes the card come to the top perhaps three times, and gets applause every time the card arrives! This happens because he understands where the magic lies, and “tosses off” nothing. Every moment of magic is clarified. In the case of a Copper/Silver effect, the trick can be greatly clarified and simplified by directing the audience’s attention to one coin in particular, say, the silver coin, and focus the script’s emphasis on the silver coin’s journey from hand to hand.

CREATE EXPECTATIONS

Without expectations, the audience is reduced to a passive role, and when that occurs, a lessening of audience response, which is based on audience involvement, is pretty much guaranteed. No matter how artistic the eye candy may be, without hooking the audience’s intellect and playing with generated assumptions, something will always be missing. Even a purely manipulative

act can create expectations; *“Well, he’s out of cards now”... or... “No way is that bird going to disappear.”* These are the sort of moments that exist in the interior monologue of every member of the audience watching a well constructed act. In a talking act, the expectations can be placed in an overt manner: *“I will find your card by stabbing it with a knife”... or... “The fourth coin is the hardest one to send through the table”... or... “The balls always end up under the cup.”* Audiences take statements like these and use them to apply a veneer of logic to the proceedings and with it assumptions and expectations. Of course, when we perform magic we constantly defy the audience’s expectations by breaking patterns or intentionally misleading them from the start. It’s not important to always satisfy the audience’s precise expectation, simply to generate one.

BE GENEROUS IN BOTH GIVING AND ACCEPTING

Generosity is crucial to opening up an audience and letting them know an emotional response to your performance is appropriate. When it is possible to shift credit for an effect to an assisting spectator, do so, and lead the applause, simultaneously instructing the audience, by example, on the kind of response they can feel free to make.

This may sound silly, but in our twisted society not everyone knows how to enjoy himself. Ever watch someone try to lead a typical group in a sing-a long? An audience can benefit from non-confrontational instruction, especially when the recipient of the adulation is one of their own. They will like you all the more for it, as we all know. A more difficult skill to acquire is that of generously accepting applause, and giving the applause its moment to happen. Very often a performer will hurry into another effect, or busy himself with striking props when it would be far more appropriate to stand and bask in the audience’s recognition. This doesn’t mean you should stand grinning until

all response has dwindled away, it means you should face the audience and recognize them, recognizing you. This is in no way egocentric, In fact, to do anything else is rude. And for this to happen effectively, we must...

END EFFECTS

One of the unfortunate habits we occasionally possess is the unwillingness to sell the end of an effect. I've always felt this is because in most cases, by a trick's end all the technical demands have been met, so the performer—thinking only from the perspective of a technician—feels it would be improper to now highlight an element where he does nothing at all. As difficult as it may be to believe, I've seen performances (and probably given a few) in which it was actually unclear an effect was indeed over. This is especially true in card and coin tricks that involve phases, one phase seems no more important or daunting than the last so the final step just appears to be another stop on a train. Naturally the true proceedings of an effect are those that exist for the spectators, so to sell a climax short only serves to reprimand the audience for investing concentration on your activities (they will be less willing to do so as the performance continues). Obviously, not all tricks have to conclude with the magician acting as if all have just witnessed the Second Coming, but all tricks should end with an implied "period," which, when married to appropriate body posture, also acts as an applause cue.

CHEAT AND DON'T CHEAT

As magicians we cheat all the time. In some ways it is the definition of our craft. When it comes to the ways and means of accomplishing an effect, we should cheat to our heart's content. When setting up an effect, we can lie to further our cause, stating we will do one thing, only to do another. We can

claim to be demonstrating one skill, when our true method lies elsewhere. However, we must not cheat the audience's emotions. Even though comedy can be mined by leading on the audience emotionally, and flipping expectations, that becomes an acknowledged game between performer and audience (and even that well can't be frequently dipped into). We are not quickly forgiven when we sincerely cheat an audience's emotions. This happens in many ways, the most obvious being when we continually prove them wrong with a "Gotcha" attitude, and much has been written about this. But there are other, more subtle ways of cheating an audience that will slowly work to one's disadvantage, such as, say, stating that a card location is extremely difficult, then happily performing it with total ease . . . or by claiming a golden token has the powers of The Pharaoh, and removing it from a pocket with the rest of your spare change. In situations like these, we are appealing to the audience for their trust, and upon receiving it pointing out their folly in giving it to us. If we legitimately establish a premise of an effect's great difficulty, we owe it to the audience to maintain that premise, whether it's true or false. We cannot ask them on one hand to drop their guard and suspend disbelief, and on the other hand point out their poor judgment. That is cheating an audience's emotions, and that is a bruise that lingers, because...

PEOPLE ARE CREDULOUS

Everyone wants to believe. Advertisers know this. Religious figures know this. Defendants know this. We've all seen a spectator who is indifferent to card tricks suddenly become engaged when mentalism is the theme or there is a promise of a new cheating technique. They want to believe. In a world where individuals are instructed to be on the alert or risk being taken advantage of, the sanctuary of a space where defenses can be dropped and we are allowed to believe without attendant anxiety is a space to be cherished. Movies and plays allow us

to do this, to relax and become our natural selves, believing as we want to. Magic can do this, too. Adults and children can let defenses down, allowing themselves to be tickled, to talk to sponge bunnies, to accept a silly challenge, to imagine something in their minds and try to make it happen. This willingness to believe is something we can acknowledge and respect. If we do, we will gain the audience's trust and entertain them in a meaningful way, fulfilling a need that is unique.

BE SAD TO SEE THEM GO

When your performance is over, look at your audience and like them. Usually there is something to like. If you have had a tough set, find amusement even in that, and like them for it. A crass truth about life is that we generally like those who like us. As paid performers, it's our job to go first.

David Regal
Constant Fooling
2002

DAVID REGAL

David Regal's view on magic has been shaped by his work experience as a television writer and a member of the prestigious improv group *Chicago City Limits*. He has won numerous awards for his work outside of magic, as well as the prestigious Lecturer of the Year from the Academy of Magical Arts.



DOUG CONN

Doug Conn's *Tricks of My Trade* is full of practical, real-world material from a busy magician who earned his stripes through years of street performing. I always remembered the theory section of his book, because it offered three lines and six words. But as Spanish author Baltasar Gracian said, "Good things, when short, are twice as good."



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While we're on the subject of good advice on presentation, here are six more words, courtesy of Doug Conn.

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DOUG'S THEORY SECTION

BY DOUG CONN

Be Nice.
Be Interesting.
Be Amazing.

Doug Conn
Tricks of My Trade
1999

*Rarely do those who teach us via their books leap off the page and into our lives, but that is exactly what happened to me with Ken Weber. His *Maximum Entertainment* has become a modern bible on how to improve magic presentations. When I relocated to New York City, I found myself in close proximity Mr. Weber, who came into my life at just the moment I most needed a director.*

Whenever I ask Ken for help on a presentation, his response is always the same: "Email me the script and I'll take a look." He knows, by now, that he expects every serious magician to script their routines on paper, where they can be most easily pared down and edited.

Nevil Maskelyne wrote of paring down presentations—of "cutting the fat,"—but he did not offer explicit suggestions on how we might do that. Here, Ken offers lines of dialogue we should eliminate from our vocabulary, and strategies to make our presentations tighter and stronger.

LANGUAGE SKILLS

BY KEN WEBER

You are a writer. Even if you ignore the advice in the chapter on Scripting and even if you never commit your words to paper or computer screen, as long as you speak to your audience with pre-planned words, you are a writer.

Writing is mind-to-mind communication. You, the entertainer, send your thoughts out through your mouth, whereas the novelist types them for readers to read. In both cases, entertainer and writer, one mind seeks to connect with another.

The professional writer knows that every word counts. Excess words allow minds to wander. The professional writer crafts his words, and then an editor refines and polishes. Entertainers rarely have a director, let alone the luxury of an editor.

Writing is easy; good writing is hard. I know that to be true from tortured experience. For ten years I wrote an investment newsletter, Weber's Fund Advisor, and I received laudatory letters saying my publication was one of the better-written financial services. If that was true, it was more a reflection of the sad state of financial newsletters than on any reportorial skills I possessed. I always felt that whatever meager writing talent I exhibited stemmed from my being a good reader, and I kept

re-writing my eight-page newsletter (which contained mostly charts and graphs) until what I read no longer embarrassed me. As entertainers, we must write clearly. Before anything else can happen, our audience must know what we mean. That's why you must relentlessly drive yourself to fashion your words with precision.

WORDS AND PHRASES WE CAN DO WITHOUT

Every word you utter has impact, so you must strive to eliminate words that add nothing—or worse, tarnish your aura. Here are a few common examples:

- Magicians and mentalists perennially begin effects by announcing, “Let’s **try** something.” “Let’s **try** an experiment.” “Let’s **try**...”

The word “try” and its siblings—attempt, endeavor, take a shot, take a stab—are weak, flaccid words. Think back to “The Empire Strikes Back,” when Yoda forcefully directs Luke Skywalker to “Do or do not. There is no try.”

Yes, in some cases you do want to hedge your bet and “try” allows that. And it may be brought into play to boost tension, by implying that this may work for you tonight, or it might not. You are saying to your audience, in effect, “I sure hope you’re here on one of those good nights when this works!” (Escape artists thrive by casting doubt on the outcome.) So if you want to play that note, use it. Just be sure you’re not using it because that’s the way it was written in the instructions for the trick.

English performer Derren Brown uses “try” several times on his TV specials. It plays well for him because he works so strongly that he actually needs to throw some uncertainty into the mix, if for no other reason than to vary the tension

level. When he says he wants to try something, you get the feeling that this may well be the moment when you will see him fail. The same holds true for many mentalists who give the impression that each “experiment” they do (and I’m not a fan of “experiment” either) is something where the outcome is in doubt.

For most other performers, including almost every magician, the audience has little or no doubt that they will succeed, so the “try” becomes superfluous at best, and because your audience may feel an undercurrent of unnecessary verbal deception, it may start to sound as insincere as it in fact is.

- A silk (or polyester) cloth is not a “**silk**.” It might be a cloth, a piece of cloth, a silk cloth, a bandana, or a kerchief, but the term “silk” is not used by normal folk.
- “Say ‘Stop’ as I **riffle** through the cards.” When did you ever hear a non-magician use the word riffle? They don’t. You might “flip” through the cards. Or you could just ask your participant to, “Say ‘Stop’ as I go through the cards.”
- “Here’s a **bit** you may enjoy.” A “bit” connotes lower-end show biz. At least say, “Here’s something you may enjoy.”
- Show normal people the cube we call a **die**. Ask what you’re holding and they will say a “dice.” Our “die” may be correct English, but it is not commonly known. You might say with a friendly smile, “two dice, one die,” to avoid confusion.
- “**For my first trick...**” Why would you say something so obvious? Ditto for “For my next trick...”
- “For my next **effect**” is worse still. What, to a layperson, is an effect! It’s a meaningless filler word that takes you nowhere.

(Ricky Jay repeatedly used the word “effect” in his show, Ricky Jay and His 52 Assistants. However, in that context it fit because he was giving, in essence, a history lesson about magic, and so it affected the desired effect.)

- **“Just like that.”** As in, “And I threw the coins into the invisible hole, just... like... that.” Tedious, meaningless, and when repeated more than once, boring. If I can see what you just did, it’s redundant to tell me you did it ^just like that.” Or “Place your hand on the cards, just like that,” which sounds patronizing.
- And when the spectator does as asked, the “just like that” is often followed, enthusiastically, with either **“Great!”** or worse, **“That’s fantastic!”** (British performers substitute **“Brilliant!”**)

Unless you’re going for a laugh, when you bray “Fantastic!” or “Wonderful!” or “Brilliant!” to a spectator upon completion of a simple request, you have just told that person that you assumed were incapable of following your instructions. And the more enthusiastic you are, the more explicit your message becomes.

If you must indicate that the person has done what you want, think of other ways to signal your satisfaction, without demeaning them. Perhaps a simple “Thanks” or just a quick “Perfect,” said as an aside.

- **“Just so.”** As in, “I’ll place these cards over here, just so.” Again, it adds nothing; it’s just so much filler.
- **“Would you like to change your mind?”** is a cliché, and come hell or high water, clichés should be avoided like the plague. It can also seem slightly insulting to participants,

suggesting that their original choices were poor ones, or that they're incapable of making good choices the first time. Be more specific about the options for changing their decision. "Should I continue dropping cards?" Or, "I'm going to offer you one last chance to choose a different envelope. Do you want the one you have, or one of these in my hand?" These phrases have more power than "Do you want to change your mind?" or any of its variations.

- **"Are you sure?"** In my life, I'm "sure" about my love of family, I'm sure that I never want to miss my return flight home, and I'm certain that I want the stock market to move higher over the long-term. Those are things about which I'm sure. Now you come along, offer me a choice of five cards (or meaningless—to me—symbols, colors, or envelopes) and then, when I point to one, you ask me if I'm "sure." Sure about what? Are there dire consequences awaiting me if I choose poorly? How carefully should I consider my options? After all, as far as I can tell, the only thing at risk is your smug satisfaction! Again, it's meaningless magic-speak filler. Most often, it's best to simply accept the spectator's judgment and proceed. Or, if you do have a legitimate desire to build up the suspense, use specifics: "Later tonight, you may think back on this moment and wonder if I influenced you with my hands or voice, so I'll wait quietly while you decide."
- **"What made you choose...?"** In the countless times I have seen magicians and mentalists ask this question ("What made you choose the circle?"), have I ever heard an interesting response? Not that I can recall. Again—as with "Are you sure?"—it's silly filler that confounds spectators. Either don't ask, or add something new, as in, "The circle is typically chosen by sex-starved alcohol abusers." Now you can ask, "Are you sure you want the circle?"
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- **“What’s the name of your card?”** That phrase, used by every magician at some time in his life, has little meaning for some laymen. I have seen, just during the time I’ve been writing this book, spectators look confused when asked this question. Cards do not have names, unless you’re doing one of the tricks that exploit this phrase (the Fred/Phil Trick). “Which card did you select?” is the better question.
- Kreskin says **“no way, shape, or form,”** way too often. It’s a bloated phrase, but many mentalists and magicians picked up on it and now use it as well.
- Any variation of **“Let me show you the first trick I learned.”** In the brief time I’ll be watching you, I don’t want to see what you did as a kid, a beginner. I want to see the tricks that took you years to master. Would a theatrical agent, who has the moral authority to request something specific from you, ask to see your first trick? No, she wants to see your best stuff. The audience can’t and won’t ask you, but they too want your best. Don’t make them feel cheated.

Of course, you could perform your first trick if you preface it with something dramatic, for example, “This was taught to me by a famous magician who made me swear to keep it a secret!” You could say that... if you can say it with conviction because it’s reasonably true.

- **“What I’m going to do now...”** or **“What I’d like you to do...”** or **“What I need you to do...”** Skip it. Can it. Drop it. Just get to the point.
- **“Alright?”** Nervous magicians follow every action with this word (which is technically an incorrect version of “all right,” but we’re dealing with spoken English here). “You can see the cards are well mixed, alright?” “I’ll place each card in an

envelope, alright?" Are those nervous-nellies waiting for a response? I hope not.

Or its variation, **"Right?" "I'm going to roll this newspaper into a cone... Right?"** The first time I saw myself on tape, it seemed every fifth word I said was "Right?"

- **"...and with any luck,** the final coin will now have joined the others." As Tina Turner might say, "What's luck got to do with it?" It's another stale phrase that we use without thinking—one which, if we do give it some thought, implies we're not in control of the magic.
- **"You've been a great crowd."** A vastly overused cliché, thanks to stand-up comics. Think of other ways to express your appreciation to your audience.
- Any variation of **"Is that fair?"** as in, "and now I'll you cut the cards as many times as you wish. Is that fair?" This immediately sets up a challenge; you have now told me that I must evaluate whether what you just did is "fair" or not. Fair how? By what standards? Fair to whom? And most important, why should I care? What's in it for me if what you do is fair, or... what? Unfair? Much better to be specific, as cited above in, "Would you like to change your mind?"

The obvious exception to this is when you are in fact laying down a challenge, as in an escape act or when doing what mentalists call "test-condition" effects.

- **"Now let's make it a little more interesting..."** is usually said to indicate a higher degree of difficulty, or, in a gambling situation, higher stakes. But if you have to announce to me that something is "more interesting," it probably isn't; the words are unadulterated filler. If the next moments truly

are more interesting, you should trust that your spectators possess sufficient brainpower to realize that for themselves. Tell me specifics about what's coming next, not banal generalities.

- **“And for those of you in the cheap seats...”** This phrase had mold growing on it when vaudeville was young. David Copperfield can legitimately refer to cheap seats (or at least, cheaper seats); few of the rest of us can. Use this phrase and some people will laugh, but many others will recognize you as a person who belongs in the cheap seats yourself. Plus, think about it—if you actually did have different seat prices and you made that “joke,” how did you just make those who couldn't afford the better seats feel?

At a major magic convention in 2003 I heard a well-known (among magicians) performer use this phrase twice in one short set. Get with the new millennium!

Ken Weber

Maximum Entertainment

2003

KEN WEBER

Ken Weber spent the first part of his life as a professional mentalist, gaining notoriety and success on the college circuit. He scaled back his performing career to pursue outside interests and raise a family. He returned to the scene in 2003 with *Maximum Entertainment*, a life's work in magic theory and advice.



The vast majority of authors in this book practice close-up magic. Some lean toward mentalism, and a few appear on large stages. I'm very glad that we are also able to include the perspective of kid-show guru David "Silly Billy" Kaye.

David's advice was written expressly for children's magicians in his Seriously Silly, but I have long adored his book because the advice is so universal. And when we get right down to it, entertaining children is similar to entertaining adults because watching magic makes children of us all.

IT'S NOT THE DESTINATION, IT'S THE RIDE

BY DAVID KAYE

I am going to teach you how to think differently about your kid show routines. After you learn these techniques you will be able to take any trick you have in the closet, or any trick you ever buy, and write a brand new routine that will completely engage your audience.

Other authors feed you their routines, but what happens if their routines aren't right for your character? Here you will learn how to build a routine from the ground up.

NOW WE ARE GOING TO THE COMEDY CLUB

The speed of a car is measured in miles per hour. Its gas use is measured in miles per gallon. The speed of a computer printer is measured in pages per minute and its print quality is measured in dots per inch. Comedians judge how good they are by the number of laughs they get per minute. A good comedian can get four to six laughs per minute. Great comedians like Jerry Seinfeld can get 10 laughs per minute. That's a laugh every six seconds. I have done standup comedy and the best I could do was three laughs per minute or a laugh every 20 seconds.

We can use a gauge like this to quantify our success at our kid shows. Instead of counting the laughs per minute, count the interactions per minute. Because we want the children in the audience to participate in many ways with the performer, we include many kinds of interactions. Besides laughter, we want the children to point, scream, yell out “turn it around,” answer a question, wiggle their fingers to make the magic happen, and say magic words. In my kids show I get four interactions per minute. That’s one interaction (laugh, call out, wiggle fingers) every 15 seconds. For a 45-minute magic show, I think that’s pretty good.

Increased interaction with the show increases involvement and active participation. The children are not passively watching in silence. They are actively participating with all their attention. Does interaction increase enjoyment? To prove it we now have to go to an NBA basketball game. Let’s say the game is progressing and your team just scored a huge shot. Now the visiting team has the ball. They are dribbling and moving the ball slowly down court. Lots of passing to slow down your team’s momentum. The game gets sluggish. What does the organist do? He starts playing a chant on the keyboard. And the crowd joins in, “De-fense! De-fense! De-fense!” Everyone yells “Charge!” The organist felt a lull in the game and, to keep people interested, he started the chanting. He increased the interaction to keep the crowd actively participating. The interactions from our seats make the experience of being at this event more fun.

It is now customary to wave white inflated 260 balloons at basketball games to distract the opposing team trying to shoot a free throw. Waving balloons from your seat makes the experience of watching the game more fun.

Have you been to or seen a rap or hip-hop concert? If so, you know that rappers also get their audiences actively involved.

Rappers tell their audience to, “Say ho!” and the audience yells “Ho.” “Say hey!” and the audience yells “Hey.” Rappers yell out to the audience phrases like, “Is Brooklyn in the house?” and the audience cheers. Rappers tell their audiences to, “Put your hands in the air like you just don’t care.” And the audience does, waving their hands from side to side. Rappers even go so far as explicitly telling their audience, “Everybody scream!” and the audience does.

The adults at the rap concert and the basketball game are treated the same way we treat the children in our audiences. Before our audience of children gets a chance to lose their focus we bring their attention right back—getting them to chant, “Turn it around! Turn it around!” The interactions from their seats make the experience of being at our shows more fun.

If you increase the number of interactions during your show the audience will have more fun. How do we do this? By changing the way we think about the structure of a routine.

IT'S NOT THE DESTINATION, IT'S THE RIDE

The best kid show magicians know that in the presentation of any magic trick, it’s not the magical moment that matters most to children, it’s the fun stuff that happens on the way. The “ride” is the part that is most important, not the “destination.” (By the way, this is true for adult magic shows as well.) I am not saying that you should ignore the magic. You are, after all, a magician and so you must do magical things. But children enjoy the ride more than they enjoy the magical climax.

Magic purists cringe thinking about it, but it’s true. And I think the reason so many “adult” magicians hate doing kid shows is because they don’t understand this concept. These magicians

perform miracles for an audience of children, yet they get absolutely no reaction. Or they get shouts of explanations like, “It was there the whole time.” These magicians must learn that fooling the audience (especially 3 to 6-year-olds) is not the goal. Adults watch a magician and know what is possible and what is not. A child can always think, “When I am a grown up I will be able to do that like all grown ups probably can.” This is one reason children are not impressed by the climax of a magic trick—the destination.

Don’t focus as much on fooling the children. It’s more important to have fun before the magic happens.

What do I mean by fun? I mean making the kids laugh— either through physical comedy, verbal comedy, or both. Acting silly (e.g., Silly Billy), goofing around, hamming it up, or all of the above, in other words, increasing those interactions per minute. These are the things that an audience of children loves and will enjoy the most. Put another way, the emphasis in my kids show is not on the magic but on the entertainment. This isn’t to say that the magic isn’t important but, with an audience of children, I go for the laugh, not the “Oooo, how did he do that?”

IN THE BEGINNING

Every effect has a beginning and an end. With the Appearing Cane, the beginning is “My hand is empty “ and the end is, “Here is a cane.” Every routine, on the other hand, has a middle section between the beginning and end.

If you are going to vanish a Nielsen Ketchup bottle, the beginning of the routine is, “I have a bottle of ketchup and I am going to make it disappear.” The end is, “It has disappeared.” If you simply showed the bottle, then crushed the bag containing it, you would have no middle. You wouldn’t have much of a routine,

either. Therefore you should add a middle to the routine. Let's say you show the ketchup and put it in the bag. You wave your hand over the bag. Then, gripping it from the bottom, you turn the bag upside down and announce that you did indeed make the ketchup disappear. The audience doesn't believe you so you right the bag and pull out the ketchup for a moment, confirming their suspicions. After lowering it back into the bag, you wave your hand again and this time snap your fingers. Then you crush the bag proving the ketchup has indeed disappeared. We put a small middle section between the beginning and the end.

Your goal is to make the middle longer. For example, consider the "Mis-Made Flag." The beginning is, "Three silks will change to a flag." The end is, "And here's the flag." But there is a middle built into this routine. The original routine included the flag with the colors in the wrong place—with blue stripes and a red field. It is this middle part that children enjoy so much. Then Warren Stephens invented another step to make the middle longer—the flag has red stripes with no blue at all. Now there are two joke flags as a middle before we get to the end—the actual flag.

A cups and balls routine doesn't really have a beginning, middle, and end in the same way. It is a multi-phase routine with each phase having a beginning, middle, and end. The whole routine is a combination of all the phases. But for children we don't want to do long, complicated, multi-phase routines. A simple plot is better, and the younger the child the simpler it must be. These are routines with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Let's look at "Sword Through Neck" as an example of putting in a long middle. The beginning of the routine is, "Here is a sword. I am going to stick it through your neck." The end is, "There, it is through your neck." If a magician were to perform this effect with that routine it would be a sad day. But luckily we put a middle into the routine. A good "Sword Through Neck" routine

can last 10 to 15 minutes before the magician finally thrusts the sword through the neck of his spectator.

Look at my routine for “The Crystal Tube” later in this part of the book. In the original effect you show your audience three separate silks, stuff them into the tube, then blow them out of the tube and they’ll be tied together. The beginning is, “Three separate silks.” The end is, “they are tied together.” If you perform this effect as explained in the instructions you will have a mighty short routine. But you’ll see I’ve added a middle that is full of fun and interaction. Now the routine is six minutes long and totally engaging.

BUT WHY SHOULD WE PUT IN A LONG MIDDLE?

The theory “It’s not the destination it’s the ride” is true for all children but why it’s true varies depending upon their age. For children 3 to 6 years old, the middle is most important because they are young and not really sure what qualifies as magic and what does not (see “What is Magic to a Child?”). Doing miracles for this age group does not impress them too much. They would much rather laugh and have fun. Therefore, emphasize the fun stuff on the way to the climax.

For these children, 3 to 6 years old, I try to make the effect as fun as possible. In fact, after I finish a routine, the kids often shout, “Let’s play that again.” (Not “Show me that again.”) They see the routines as fun games that we play. When they see me again at another friend’s party they request tricks they want to see.

For example, let’s put a silly middle into a simple routine. The routine is to make a silk vanish from a Change Bag. The beginning is, “Here is a silk.” The end is, “It’s gone.” If I want to add a middle, I may “accidentally” miss the bag and drop the silk on the floor. I may even do this a few times. And the more I do it, the funnier it gets. Of course I eventually realize my error

and continue with the trick. Burn this into your mind: *the kids enjoy the part when the handkerchief keeps dropping on the floor more than the fact that I made it disappear.*

You see, the world is full of incredible magic to a young child, A child can lift a plastic handle to his ear and hear grandma, mommy, or daddy speaking from it. Or he can push a button on a box and see hundreds of different programs, Therefore, making a silk disappear seems like no big deal. But having fun and making them laugh can be a very big deal – and that’s what you’re getting paid for.

Here’s what I do when I vanish a silk using a thumbtip. First I explain, “I am going to put this handkerchief in my hand and when I open my hand it will be all gone.” (Spoken using a child’s vocabulary.) I put the silk in my empty fist. I wave my other hand in a magical gesture and raise my closed fist high. I open the fingers of my hand and the silk flutters down to the floor. But I keep my eyes fixed on my raised hand as I announce, “All gone!” I don’t see that the silk did not disappear. To make matters worse, I continue talking, “And now for my next trick” As I ramble, the kids are yelling more and more to call my attention to the fact that I did not vanish the silk. When I finally realize what they are trying to tell me, I look down at the floor. I am startled to discover, to my surprise, that the silk is still here. To young children, this is hilarious. Why? First, the magician said he was going to do magic and he didn’t, with laughable results. And second, the magician, naive as he is, doesn’t even realize that he failed.

What is the next step in this routine? I do it all again! Exactly the same way. I place the silk in my empty fist, wave my hand, and open my fingers. The silk flutters to the floor and, ignoring it, I pretend I am so proud of my accomplishment, “For my next trick ...Again the kids yell and scream and try to tell me of my failure.

By now the kids are convinced I am an idiot. Good. Because I am going to replicate my actions exactly, only this time I will actually vanish the silk using the thumbtip.

I place the silk into the thumbtip in my fist. The kids expect a third failure. But, when I open my hand and the silk is indeed gone, the children are really surprised and thrilled. We achieved our goal. And since I set them up to expect failure, the vanish is even stronger.

So instead of showing off that I can do miracles, I had fun along the way, to everyone's delight.

This principle, "It's not the destination, it's the ride," applies to older children as well, but for a different reason. Children 7 to 13-years-old do know what is possible in the natural world. All they want to do is catch you. They come up with an explanation of the method and insist their method is accurate whether it is or not.

If you emphasize the middle, the ride, rather than fooling these kids, the routine is not only more fun, but it overcomes several problems of performing magic for this age group.

For these older groups I believe you must fool them and fool them badly. But take the emphasis away from the final effect by spending several minutes having a fun routine getting there. On the way to fooling them, if you have fun and make them laugh, you will diffuse their need to expose the method. This way, even if they think they know the secret, it is such a small part of the overall routine that it becomes insignificant. You diffuse their need to catch you and you suck the wind out of their desire to

expose you. If you emphasize the fun stuff, you minimize the method.

Look again at my routine for “The Crystal Tube.” It is long and funny with lots of interaction. Even if the children know that it is done with rubber bands (they don’t, although they do think it’s done with Velcro), it isn’t that important because we had so much fun getting to the climax.

We could also go back to our “Sword Through Neck” example. Let’s say you perform a 10-minute routine with lots of laughs and interaction, then climax by sticking the sword through your assistant’s neck. Even if a child yells out from the audience that the sword is really a slap bracelet, it doesn’t matter that much because everyone had such a good time during the previous 10 minutes.

Children here in New York see magicians so often they begin to know the effects even before they are performed. When a magician puts a Dove Pan on his table in New York, the children yell out, “Yay, we’re getting candy!” Too bad they know the ending to the trick. But if you perform a funny, engaging routine prior to producing candy, it minimizes the fact that they know what’s going to happen.

When I perform the Coloring Book sometimes children will call out, “I have that book.” But amazingly, these same children participate just like the other children. Why? Because my routine is so much fun that they forget about the secret and just have a good time.

There are several elements that all magic routines should have. These elements are Comedy, Interaction, Empowerment, and

Storytelling and they are mostly for use in a fun magic show as opposed to a serious character or a somber routine. By using these techniques you can create a fun routine that engages children.

David Kaye
Seriously Silly
2005

DAVID KAYE

David Kaye is widely considered the foremost authority on children's magic, and he has made a career entertaining the children of New York City's most elite families.



Remember that all the way back on page 331 we began our discussion of Presentation with a question posed by David Regal: what qualities separate the greatest magicians from the rest?

In his essay “The Other Half” he asks this question and follows it with some exceptional advice. Yet he doesn’t attempt to answer the question there. In this essay, I believe he does just that. So what are his answers? Sharing your humanity and having a point-of-view—both outgrowths of “character,” the last topic of this section.

Perhaps Abraham Lincoln was right: “Ability will take you to the top, but it takes character to keep you there.”

CHARACTER

BY DAVID REGAL

Although I sometimes approach magic from the point of view of a magician, I more often approach it from the mindset of a writer, performer, and improviser. In the case of magic, we are writing little “plays” that we can revisit and revise after every performance, should we choose. These plays are our tricks, routines, and presentations that, like it or not, all share one thing in common: No matter how varied our repertoire, one of the characters in our plays will always be ourselves. As we know that going in, we can tailor our writing to that character.

A character is defined by unique characteristics, so when we write to a character our work must be tailored with intent. Every well-written character we encounter in literature has qualities that differentiate him or her from other characters. When this is not the case, we react with indifference. When audiences see a magician perform in a manner that is interchangeable with the manner of many other magicians, they are apt to respond similarly. No one leaves the house and goes to see a performer motivated by the thought that the performer is no different from any other. Any time we are excited by the prospect of seeing a performance it is because of the unique characteristics of the performer. Therefore, the act of defining the person we are on

stage, or the character we want to portray, is a reasonable step to take when trying to create an engaging presentation.

Once we have defined a character for ourselves, our mission is to embrace and express that character. Just as an audience doesn't want the character of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* to start dancing like Shakira, an audience expects a performer to present a character that is, in a basic way, true to him or herself. If this sounds like a limitation, it is the opposite, as an understanding of character opens up creative avenues that would not otherwise present themselves. When we view a performance, we identify the character presented, albeit unconsciously:

- Ricky Jay is the erudite magic historian
- Lance Burton is the humble country boy with a wink in his eye

And, in other performing arts...

- Chris Rock is the outraged black man
- Bruce Springsteen is the mouthpiece of the average Joe

Within these characterizations are countless facets, but Bruce Springsteen probably won't start singing about cashing royalty checks, just as Ricky Jay most likely won't walk onto a stage and tell the audience, "I don't get no respect." Without a doubt the greatest failing of a mediocre magician is an inability to differentiate himself from another mediocre magician, and that situation cannot exist if a unique character is being presented to an audience. A vocalist who can hit High C wants people to hear it, just as one who cannot hit that note wants to avoid looking like a fool. Each of us has the ability to perform in a manner best suited to ourselves, as in life we are not the same. When we see different entertainers turn in identical performances these people cannot have examined their strengths and weaknesses, as these qualities differ from person to person. One of the first

steps we can take toward improving as a performer is developing an understanding of who we are. We can grow and mature, and should, but there needs to be an awareness of what it is we possess. A trapeze artist needs to have a firm understanding of the number of midair flips he is currently capable of executing. A comic needs to have an understanding of the type of material he best scores with. This is done not to impose limitations, but to move forward with eyes open. Certainly, to do the opposite is foolishness.

Everyone who executes a magic effect is, by default, a “performer.” Regardless of how casual or formal the conditions may be, with each performance comes the opportunity to explore the thing (or things) we do better than anyone else...and we all have it. Henry Evans performs with an elfin exuberance...James Dimmare has a graceful elegance...Penn & Teller have a honed comic edge. Even when performing informally we need to wear the cloak of ourselves. Why would we choose not to? Finding the ways we best excel as performers is not about laboring to build something from nothing, it’s about making the decision not to tear down what is there.

When discussing qualities of performance there is something much more basic that must be touched on, as it is far more important: Performing is a service industry. Even the least original, most hackneyed act can be embraced by an audience if that audience sincerely believes that the performer is dedicated to entertaining them to the best of his or her ability. The joy of performing is something that is communicated, and when an audience feels that they are being amiably served, they are apt to enjoy the experience. For this reason, the successful performer either truly enjoys making an audience happy or is good at faking it. One or the other is a necessity, as nothing earns enmity more efficiently than a perceived disdain for the audience.

We have all seen performers who act as if they'd rather be somewhere else, and oh, how we hate them. In the case of magic, what a stupid, stupid profession to go into if one does not enjoy it. What kind of ill-advised wrong turn could occur that would lead a person who dislikes performing magic to choose, of all things, to be a magician? Yet this is something we occasionally see, and I pity those magicians who are clearly unhappy when performing. I, like their audiences, leave their proximity as soon as I possibly can.

The word "improvisation" means, to many people, saying funny things on the spur of the moment. I performed improvisation for many years with Chicago City Limits, and over the course of two thousand shows that is not the type of improvisation I performed, taught, or was particularly adept at. Yes, I sometimes got lucky with a word or a line, as we all do, but for the most part I aided the illusion of wit by merely shutting up when I had nothing to say. The most common error made by a neophyte is to speak the most when he has the least to say. You'll never hear more words uttered in a row than those said by a bad improviser who hasn't a thought in his head. The kind of improvisation my group performed was unscripted character and scene work, and it is this type of improvisation that is particularly applicable to the performance of magic. This is a book of, for the most part, close-up and parlor magic—magic that very often becomes a give and take between the performer and members of the audience. Wherever there is audience involvement one finds a houseguest named The Unexpected. That does not equate to The Unwanted, for it's the unexpected elements inherent in audience involvement that can keep an act fresh and enjoyable for both the audience and performer, and often generate material that can later be incorporated into a routine.

One needs to celebrate the unexpected, and the best way to approach that is with the same skill sets used in improvisation.

First and foremost, in a magic performance, as in an improvised performance, there is never an inescapable need to make a mad rush to the verbal. Sometimes, when the unexpected occurs, words will be appropriate, other times not. There will be occasions when a choice line will be offered up by one's brain, but not always, or even often. A confident improviser doesn't necessarily require the verbal, because he has a complete understanding of his character. The proper response to the unexpected is to behave as your character would behave under those circumstances, with an emotion your character would respond with at that moment. This is primary. The words your character may or may not say are of less importance. Improvised scene work, at its core, is four steps:

1. Know your character
2. Pay attention to what is occurring on stage
3. React as your character would react
4. Verbalize

You might laugh, weep, shake your head in despair, recoil, embrace the person opposite you, dance a jig.... None of these things have words necessarily attached to them. The emotional reaction comes first, the words later. On those occasions when a witticism rolls off the tongue, make a note in your journal with a little star next to it, but know that when improvisers and actors talk about "being in the moment" that it doesn't mean they could say funny things quickly. It means that their complete understanding of their character and the surrounding circumstances allowed them to react appropriately. In the context of comedy, it makes funny things happen.

David Regal
Approaching Magic
2008

PART EIGHT



CONSTRUCTION

"WHAT IS PERCEIVED AS PRODUCT
BY OTHERS IS PROCESS FROM THE
ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE."

-JOYCE CAROL OATES

Before we get into a discussion of how to construct a magic effect, David Regal expresses a sobering realization: that the impact of a strong performance is determined mostly by choosing the right trick for the right time.

THE HORRIBLE TRUTH

BY DAVID REGAL

How sad. No matter how much we practice, and no matter how many new moves we learn, the effectiveness of the performance of a trick will very much be determined by:

a) The trick's plot

and

b) When we choose to perform the trick

At the end of the day it cannot be denied that these two things, selection and placement, can make the difference between another card trick and a happening. The rest of The Horrible Truth is the fact that the difficulty of a trick's execution may not necessarily play a part in its effectiveness. Certainly, sometimes we tell the truth in magic, and execute the very difficult maneuver we claim we are executing; but just as certainly the opposite is true, and the very simple is very effective. In fact, it may be the most effective thing we can do at that moment.

David Regal
Constant Fooling
2001

Strengthening an effect can be reduced to this: strengthening the convictions of a spectator. If we can solidify a spectator's belief in what transpires, the effect is stronger. If she is convinced of the conditions before and after a trick, the effect is stronger. If she is convinced that you caused the effect to occur without technique, the effect is stronger.

How do we go about this? I have given the largest amount of space in this collection to Darwin Ortiz's seminal essay on Conviction. It is, to date, the first, last, and definitive work on the topic.

CONVICTION

BY DARWIN ORTIZ

THE EXPOSITORY PHASE

Virtually all close-up magic tricks can be divided into two parts, which I'll term the expository phase and the magical phase. Robert-Houdin said that before you change an apple into an orange you should make sure the audience knows it's an apple. Changing the apple into an orange is the magical phase. Making sure first that they know it's an apple is the expository phase.

The expository phase always comes first, for example: having a card selected and returned to the deck; placing four coins on the table under four playing cards; having the four aces signed and buried in different parts of the deck; or dealing the aces in a T—formation and dealing three cards on top of each one. Then comes the magical phase: making the selected card rise from the deck; making the coins travel from card to card; producing the aces from four different pockets; or making the aces gather together in one packet.

At first glance, some tricks might seem like they don't fit this format. For example, does producing a coin at the fingertips have any expository phase? Isn't it all magic? Admittedly, this is a case where the exposition is so brief, it almost seems nonexistent. Still, the production of a coin at your fingertips

won't have much impact unless something has gone before to lead the audience to believe you don't have a coin in your hand. One might almost term these two phases of a trick the boring part and the interesting part. This isn't really accurate since the expository phase can and should be interesting to your audience too. (Indeed, if you can't make the expository phase interesting, your magic is bound to fail since the audience won't be paying any attention by the time the magical phase arrives.) Nevertheless, it is true that the magical phase is inherently interesting while the expository phase is not inherently interesting.

This leads many magicians to treat the expository phase as a nuisance to be gotten out of the way as soon as possible. They act as if the exposition is of no importance. A typical example is the magician who says, "It doesn't matter how you control the selected card. The audience doesn't care how you control the card. They're only interested in how you reveal it."

The fallacy of this attitude becomes obvious when you realize that the expository phase and the magical phase in magic are exactly analogous to the setup and the punchline in a joke. It's the punchline that gets the laugh, but it's not the punchline that's funny; it's the entire joke that's funny.

To put it another way, the setup determines how funny the punchline will be. Imagine a comic who stood before an audience and only recited punchlines. Do you really think he'd get lots of laughs? Do you think it doesn't matter what he says during the setup because the audience is only interested in the punchline? Not only is the setup necessary, the setup must be done just a certain way for the joke to work. Any professional comic will tell you that if a gag isn't set up properly it will die.

In the same way, the expository phase of a magic trick is not merely a necessary evil, it's a pivotal element of the effect. In

fact, it's only a slight exaggeration to say that the expository phase is what determines how strongly the effect as a whole will play. Admittedly, it's important to make the expository phase as interesting as possible. We'll talk about that later in the sections on Substantive Meaning, Situational Meaning, and Pacing. Right now I want to talk about perhaps the single most important consideration in creating strong magic: *making the expository phase as convincing as possible.*

DEGREES OF CONVICTION

One of the most important factors that will determine how strongly your magic registers with an audience is the degree of conviction you achieve in their minds. The more strongly the audience believes that the coin is in your hand, the more amazed they'll be when you show that it's gone. Stated baldly this way the point seems obvious, but I think that many magicians don't really believe there are degrees of conviction. They think that either the audience believes or they don't and that, therefore, spending time trying to strengthen conviction is just something to do if you're working for other magicians.

Degrees of conviction is one reason why magical methods are not really interchangeable and why one version of a trick may be far more powerful than another. It's also a major reason why visual magic is so strong. A person will never be more convinced that a card is the ace of spades than when he is staring right at its face. Let's take a look at the factors that affect conviction.

EMOTIONAL MEMORY

In achieving conviction in a spectator's mind it's important to remember that both rational and irrational elements can bear on the matter. Consider the factor I call emotional memory. Try this experiment. Perform a simple coin vanish for some laypeople.

Just pretend to put the coin in your hand but don't. Patter for about ten seconds, then open your hand to show the coin gone. On another occasion do the same thing, only this time patter for about a minute before opening your hand to show the coin gone. If you try this test repeatedly, you will find that you'll consistently get a stronger reaction when you wait only ten seconds before revealing the vanish.

What's going on here? Presumably you performed the move just as deceptively in each case. Yet when you patter longer it almost seems as if the audience has half-forgotten that they saw you put the coin in your hand. In a sense, they have. Of course, in a strictly intellectual sense they still remember they saw the coin placed in the hand; if questioned on the point, they will certainly verify that they saw you place it there.

Yet, while the intellectual memory hasn't faded, the emotional conviction that came from apparently seeing the coin placed in the hand has partially faded. The more time that elapses between closing the hand around the coin and opening the hand to show the coin gone, the less strongly the audience feels in their gut that it must be there. That's one reason why Slydini's "One-Coin Routine" is so strong. Each vanish of the coin follows right on the heels of the audience seeing the coin in the hand.

I recall two different performances I've seen that vividly underscored this point. In one case the magician was performing a "Coins Through the Table" routine in which four half-dollars penetrated one at a time. He placed the four coins in his hand then, while keeping the hand in a closed fist, he asked a spectator to point out the "soft spot" in the table. When she did so, he rapped the spot a couple of times with his fist and questioned its softness. He asked the spectator if she wanted to change her mind. When she declined, he insisted that she change her mind. After a new soft spot was chosen, he asked the other spectators

if they would prefer that he use a different spot on the table. When a soft spot had been selected by plebiscite, he finally brought his fist down on the table and opened it to reveal only three coins while his other hand emerged from under the table with the fourth coin. This ordeal was repeated with each of the remaining half-dollars.

This performer received no audience reaction to any of the penetrations. I think the reason was clear. After each interminable period of meaningless prattle about soft spots, people could hardly remember how many coins he had placed in his fist at the outset. Again, in a strictly intellectual sense they could recall the number, but the visceral experience of seeing the coins go into the hand had faded to the point where it carried no conviction. (This is also a good example of why a performer should not play up meaningless conditions. Did this magician really think people were going to walk out of the performance saying, "Not only did he make the coin go through the table, the most amazing thing is that he let me pick what spot on the table it would penetrate!" If he had asked me to point to the soft spot, I would've pointed between his ears.)

The second example involved a far more talented magician, but he allowed the same error to ruin a classic effect. The performer was working a trade show. The effect in question was "Triumph." He had a card selected and returned to the deck. He then turned half the deck face up and shuffled the two halves together.

Then came the fatal error. He placed the deck aside and launched into an extended pitch about the product he was representing. When he finally spread out the cards to show that they were all face down except for the selected card it had virtually no impact.

He had allowed the emotional memory of seeing face-up cards and face-down cards pushed into each other to dissipate.

There is no denying that pitching the product is a vital part of a trade show performer's job. However, if instead of holding the climax of the trick hostage to make his audience stay for the commercial, he had finished the effect and then done his pitch, I'm certain everyone would have stayed and listened if only so they could see another miracle like the one they'd just witnessed.

Remember Houdin's advice that before you change an apple into an orange you should make sure people realize it's an apple? He might have added that you shouldn't allow too much time to elapse between the audience's last glimpse of the apple and their first glimpse of the orange.

Admittedly, there are other factors besides emotional memory to consider in gauging the optimal elapsed time between showing the original state and revealing the changed state. One is the possibility of building suspense before the revelation.

Another factor to consider is that of deceptiveness. Too short a time lapse might make it easy for the audience to backtrack and figure out what must have happened. If you show that a coin has vanished the instant you drop it in your hand, it won't be difficult for the spectators to figure out that you must have retained the coin in the other hand.

DETERIORATING CONVICTION

A difficult problem that arises in many effects is that, although the performer may succeed in creating a high degree of conviction at the outset, the very progress of the effect serves to undermine

that conviction. Consequently, each subsequent phase of the effect becomes weaker rather than stronger.

Consider the typical ace assembly. The performer apparently deals the four aces in a T-formation. Actually, the three aces in the follower positions have been switched for indifferent cards; however, due to the deceptiveness of the switch, the spectator is certain that all four cards on the table are aces.

When the first ace travels to join the leader, the spectator is amazed. When the second ace joins the leader, the spectator begins to wonder whether all the cards laid out at the beginning really were aces. By the time the last ace travels across, the spectator is certain that all the aces weren't on the table to begin with. Although he doesn't know how the switch occurred, his initial conviction as to the positions of the aces has eroded to the point where the last phase of the trick is the least powerful rather than the most powerful as dramatic theory demands.

This is not to say that repetitive effects should be avoided. The really effective versions of these tricks, however, are those that somehow reinforce conviction as the effect progresses.

The specific means that will work best depend on the specific trick. What each of these examples shows, though, is the value of maintaining a high level of conviction throughout a repetitive effect either by means of some condition (such as laying out the aces on the table face up) or some convincer (such as flashing the face of the ambitious card as it is buried in the deck). Let's take a closer look at how conditions and convincers work.

CONDITIONS

If conviction is a key factor determining the impact of a magic effect, the most important factor determining how much conviction an effect achieves is the strictness of the conditions

under which it's performed. By conditions I mean such things as whether the deck is shuffled by a spectator, whether a selected card is signed, whether the aces congregated while the spectator had her hand on the leader packet, whether certain key procedures are performed by the magician or by a spectator, whether the spectator is allowed to think of any card or is limited to only certain choices, whether the magic happens without the performer touching the props, or whether you do the effect with borrowed objects or your own.

Many magicians will tell you that laypeople can't appreciate stringent conditions, that those things matter only to other magicians. This position gains weight from the fact that many magicians who perform only for other magicians become obsessed with the conditions of an effect to the exclusion of all other factors. Furthermore, when such a magician does perform for laypeople, it often becomes obvious that the conditional elements so dear to his heart don't matter at all to the audience.

Does this mean that laypeople don't care about conditions? Actually, the issue of conditions is every bit as important to lay audiences as magician audiences. However, the specific conditions that impress laymen are often totally different from those that impress other magicians. Magicians' reactions to conditions are shaped by their knowledge of how such effects are actually done; laypeople's reactions to conditions are shaped by how they, sometimes naively, think such an effect might be done.

Suppose you perform "The Card to Envelope/Wallet" for a mixed audience of both magicians and laymen. After the signed selection has been replaced in the deck, you very fairly show your hand empty, then reach in your jacket pocket and remove your wallet. You unzip it and take out an envelope. You show

that not only is the flap of the envelope glued shut but it is also sealed with a blob of wax.

The magicians in the audience will be very impressed by the fact that you showed your hand empty before removing the wallet since they know this isn't possible in the standard method of performing this effect. Laypeople will be much less affected by this condition since, if the card was convincingly lost in the deck, it won't occur to them that it could be hidden in your hand. Furthermore, they would see no way that a palmed card could be instantly introduced into a sealed envelope. Therefore, they will believe the hand is empty even if it's not shown. (By contrast, the magicians will believe the hand is not empty unless it is shown.)

The laypeople will be very impressed, however, by the fact that the envelope is sealed with wax since this appears to make it even more impossible to get the card into the envelope than just gluing the flap shut. Magicians will not be at all impressed by this condition since they know that the card is not inserted into the envelope through the flap opening anyway.

Thus both the magicians and the laypeople will be impressed by the conditions under which the "Card to Envelope/Wallet" was performed, but each group will be impressed by different conditions.

I'll give you another example from my own work. Whenever I perform for laypeople, I always roll up my sleeves. I've found through experience that this condition makes the performance much more memorable for them; it eliminates a possible explanation (cards hidden in my sleeves) which they would otherwise suspect. Of course, this condition doesn't impress

other magicians at all since they know that the notion of magicians having cards up their sleeves is a myth.

Incidentally, you shouldn't condescendingly assume that this layman fixation with sleeves is a sign of their stupidity. Let's look at it from their standpoint. An audience sees me perform "Darwin's Wild Card" for example, in which eight black deuces change into red nines in a totally incomprehensible manner. It's only logical for them to wonder where the nines came from and where the deuces went to.

Since my hands were undeniably empty at the outset, are undeniably empty at the end, and have not approached any possible place of concealment, it's perfectly rational to suspect the one place of concealment that is always near my hands. From the standpoint of the information the layperson has to work with, suspecting the sleeves is an intelligent—indeed, an unavoidable—conclusion.

However, when you roll up your sleeves, you remove the last possible refuge of logic. The spectator's intellect can no longer protect his emotions from reacting with awe to what he sees. I believe anyone who performs visual card magic can increase the impact of his magic on laypeople by fifty percent simply by rolling up his sleeves.

Indeed, long experience has taught me that there are three explanations that are always on the tip of a layperson's tongue when he watches card magic: cards in the sleeve, marked cards, and duplicates. If you transform one card into another, they will suspect that the card was exchanged for one in your sleeve. If you identify a selected card, they will suspect that the deck is marked. If you make a card travel from one place to another,

they will suspect that the card that arrived at point B is only a duplicate of the one that started at point A.

Therefore, you can greatly strengthen such effects by imposing conditions that eliminate those theories. I've already recommended performing with sleeves rolled up. If you're going to identify a card selected by a spectator, it'll be more effective if you have the card selected in such a way that you never get to see its back. For example, you might have the spectator select the card while your back is turned or have him peek at the card rather than remove it from the deck.

If you're going to make a card travel to some impossible location, you must take steps to eliminate the possibility of a duplicate. Generally, the best solution is to have the card signed. (Ironically, magicians seldom suspect sleeved cards, marked decks, or duplicates which often makes it possible to fool them badly with precisely those methods that would have little chance of getting past laypeople.)

This raises an important point. We magicians are often spectators of magic as well as performers of magic. That's why it can be difficult for us to distinguish between those conditions that impress us when we watch a trick and those conditions that would impress laypeople when we perform a trick.

Recently I read a magic book that contained a Named Triumph effect. This is a version of "Triumph" in which the spectator does not pick a card, he merely names any card he wishes. The cards are then mixed face up and face down. At the end, the named card is the only face-up card in the deck. This effect received

particularly high praise from the publisher in the flap copy of the book.

I'm sure this version of "Triumph" would be much stronger for magicians than the standard version. I'm also sure that it would be much weaker for laypeople than the standard version. I've had enough experience performing for lay audiences to predict with some confidence what a layman's reaction to this effect would be. When you proudly displayed the climactic layout of the cards at the end of your tour de force, he'd look at you completely unimpressed and say, "Well, sure, I told you what my card was!"

If you watch laypeople closely when you have them pick a card you'll notice that they're almost paranoid about hiding its face from you. If you ask them to show the card to others, they will do so in a very guarded way to make sure there is no chance of your catching a peek. If anything occurs as the card is returned to the deck that makes them think you might have seen it they will immediately yell, "You saw it! Let me pick another one."

I once saw a prominent bar magician ask a spectator to name her the benefit of the audience at the end of the trick just before he revealed it. She refused to do it. This resulted in a battle of wills them which almost led to the performer having her ejected from his bar. I too have sometimes encountered resistance when asking a spectator to name her card at the end of the trick. If laypeople are reluctant to name their selection at the end of a trick, imagine how unimpressed they would be with a trick in which they had to name their card at the very beginning!

From a layperson's perspective, the whole point of pick-a-card trick is that you don't know what card they picked. This makes perfect sense from their viewpoint. The only way a layman could ever find a card in the deck is if he knew what card he was

looking for. It's natural that he would assume the same applies to you.

By contrast, magicians know that most pick-a-card tricks depend on controlling the *location* of the card in the deck, not on knowing its identity. They would be impressed by a version of "Triumph" in which they could name any card in a shuffled deck since this would preclude all the standard controls. Laypeople don't know about any of those controls. For them a version of "Triumph" in which their card is buried in the deck, its identity unknown to you, is much stronger than one where they have to tell you the name of the card.

This effect provides a good example of how you can fool yourself into believing that laypeople can't appreciate fine points and that one method is as good as another as far as lay audiences are concerned. You perform your super-technical Named Triumph and, to your dismay, it's greeted with yawns. Your reaction might be, "Laymen don't know what good magic is. You may as well just do the slop shuffle for them."

If instead you realize that laypeople's appreciation of conditions is molded by their naive notions of how they think magic must be done, you might take the following approach that I've christened "Nameless Triumph." Have the deck shuffled by a spectator, then have the spectator peek at a card. Secretly glimpse the selection and immediately hand the deck out for another shuffle. As far as your lay audience is concerned, you can't know either the identity or the location of the card in the deck. (They are, of course, only half right.) Now perform the "Named Triumph" handling using your secret knowledge of the card's identity.

Having the spectator shuffle immediately after your glimpse can even be tied into the theme of your presentation. When the

spectator returns the deck, say, “Thank goodness you shuffled like a normal person. The last time I did this trick, the guy shuffled like this.” Now you go into your face-up/face-down shuffles. This is a powerful version of “Triumph” that should flabbergast any audience, whether laymen or magicians.

Hopefully, you’re starting to realize that conditions are a matter of audience perception. Perception, in turn, is shaped by your point of view, and a lay audience’s point of view is very different from that of a magician audience. This point is important enough to raise to the level of a basic principle: how impressive a condition is depends on your audience’s perceptions, not on the reality of the situation. This is a powerful secret. It means that you can often make an effect stronger without making it any harder. You do this by incorporating a condition that seems important even though it doesn’t affect the working of the trick at all.

Mind you, there are some conditions that impress both magicians and laymen, although many magicians won’t admit it. The inability of most magicians to understand which conditions matter to laypeople and which don’t is a prime reason why so much of what is published in magic is irrelevant to performing in the real world.

IDENTIFYING IMPORTANT CONDITIONS

The question then isn’t whether the conditions of an effect are important to lay audiences, but rather which conditions matter to them and which don’t. Here are some techniques to help you answer that question for any given effect.

First, try as an exercise to pretend you don’t know anything about magic. Take the effect in question and try to figure out

how it might be done. Use all your native intelligence but don't use any of your technical knowledge of magicians' methods.

Once you've developed some theories, you can be reasonably sure that any conditions which seem to disprove those theories will have impact on a lay audience. As I stressed earlier, the conditions that matter to magician audiences are those that relate to the way they know how a particular effect is usually done. The conditions that matter to laypeople are those that relate to the way they guess a particular effect could be done.

Second, try to remember back to when you were a layman. I've found this a particularly useful practice in gaining insights into how laypeople think. After all, we all started out as laymen. When you first became interested in magic, chances are you saw many effects performed in your first few visits to the magic shop or magic club meetings. Try to remember the ones that made the greatest impression on you and, most importantly, why they affected you so strongly. The conditions that impressed you then are the ones that will impress your audiences now.

Third, and most important, listen to your audiences. There are many ways in which they'll tell you what they consider important. The first is how strongly they react. If you've tried doing different versions of the same trick and one gets a stronger reaction than others, check to see if the stronger one contains a condition particularly impressive to laymen.

Audiences will also tell you what they think is important through direct comments to you or to other laypeople that you may overhear during or after a performance. I can't tell you how many times I've heard a layman say in disbelief after one of my effects, "And he did it with his sleeves rolled up!"

Another instructive time to listen to laypeople is when they're describing to someone else an effect you performed (or describing to you an effect they saw another magician perform.) Inevitably they'll leave out many details. The points they choose to include in the description are the ones they consider important. If they mention a condition, it's because it's important to them.

You may be surprised at how perceptive laypeople can be. An old man, a complete layman, once told me of a wonderful magician he had seen in his youth. Although he couldn't remember the magician's name, from the description it was obvious he was talking about Cardini. The point that impressed him most and which he mentioned repeatedly was how the magician was able to perform those intricate manipulations while wearing gloves. This is a condition many magicians would think would surely be lost on laypeople.

THE MUST-BELIEVE TEST

Finally, here is a simple technique I've found very useful in identifying important conditions. I call it the must—believe test. Simply ask yourself this question: what is the one false premise the audience must believe if they are to view the effect as a miracle?

For example, in the "Torn and Restored Card," the one false premise they must believe is that the card you show restored at the end is the same one you tore up at the beginning. In "Triumph," they must believe that face-up and face-down cards are really mixed together at the end of the shuffle. In the "Ambitious Card," they must believe that the card that appears on top of the deck is the same one you buried in the middle. In a typical ace assembly, they must believe that the four aces begin in four different packets. As these examples show, once you ask

the must-believe question, the answer in most cases is obvious. The trick is to ask the question in the first place.

Once you've identified what the audience must believe, you'll know that any conditions that strengthen that belief will make the trick stronger. Conditions that relate to other issues will matter little.

Occasionally, the one thing the audience must believe to view the trick as a miracle is actually a true premise. For instance, in the "Card to Wallet," what they must believe is that the card that is found in the wallet is the same one that was lost in the deck. Of course, it really is the same card. Yet you still have to introduce a condition, such as having the card signed, to achieve the necessary conviction or the trick will fail. The fact that something is true doesn't mean the audience will assume it's true.

Also, occasionally, there may be two or, in rare cases, three false premises the audience must believe. In the "Card to Envelope" they must believe that the card in the envelope is the same one that was lost in the deck, but they must also believe that the envelope is completely sealed. In any case, the basic principles of applying the must-believe test remain the same.

You'll find the must-believe test is more useful in analyzing some effects than others. But in many cases it can help you distinguish between important conditions and unimportant ones. It can also help you in comparing different versions of the same effect to determine which one will play more strongly. Once you identify the one false premise the audience must believe, you'll know that whichever version is more convincing on that point will get the stronger reaction.

What all the exercises I've just given will help you achieve is to see the effect from the audience's point of view. This is something you must always strive for, yet which most magicians fail to do. Al Baker has often been quoted as saying that many good tricks have been killed by improvements, yet Baker's own books are filled with his improved versions of standard effects. Clearly, he didn't believe that all efforts at improving tricks were bad. What's the key difference between those efforts at improvement that succeed and those that only succeed in killing a good trick? I believe that failing to understand what conditions in a trick matter to an audience is the source of most lethal "improvements."

An improvement that strengthens an important condition will always make for a stronger effect. Unfortunately, many "improved" versions actually eliminate important conditions in order to make the trick easier to perform. In order to make a trick more convenient to do, the magician destroys the one feature that made the effect worth doing. There are many elements of your magic that an audience may care about, but your personal convenience is not one of them. Keep that in mind as you read the following discussion.

THE NO-CONTACT CONDITION

There is one condition that relates to so many different effects, is so important in the minds of lay audiences, and is so frequently violated by magicians that I feel it deserves separate discussion. That is what I term the no-contact condition. Simply stated, if an effect involves an object traveling from point A to point B, the effect will be substantially stronger if point A and point B never come in contact with each other.

If the effect consists of a coin traveling from the right fist to the left fist, the impact will lessen if the two fists touch, even for

only a moment. If the effect consists of a selected card traveling from the deck to your wallet, the impact will lessen if the wallet is rested on the deck when you first remove it from your pocket. Mind you, if you asked the spectator how the coin could travel from hand to hand even if they did touch, as long as the fists remained closed, he wouldn't be able to tell you. Neither could he tell you how the card could get inside the wallet just because the wallet rested momentarily on the deck. Nevertheless, instinctively people sense that the task becomes a little easier if the two points touch—and of course, they're right!

Because this condition registers on an instinctive level, the spectator himself may not consciously realize that the reason a trick leaves him cold is that it violates the no-contact condition. This doesn't for a moment mean it isn't important. (As a matter of fact, all the most important factors that determine an effect's impact on an audience function partly on an unconscious level.) Despite the unconscious aspect of the no-contact condition, spectators will often reveal the importance they attach to that factor in their comments; to the perceptive magician, spectators' comments often reveal more than they themselves realize.

The no-contact condition can also be violated by openly conveying some object from point A to point B before the invisible transfer of another object. In Alex Elmsley's "Between Your Palms," the performer begins by placing aside a card sight unseen. Later this card proves to be the same card the spectator selected from the deck and signed after the unknown card was set aside. It would be difficult to imagine a more amazing plot. Yet this trick which intrigues magicians leaves laypeople cold. The problem is not with the plot but with the procedure, which violates the no-contact condition. Before the identity of the unknown card is revealed it is brought in contact with two other selected cards—cards which were removed from the deck after the signed selection was buried in the deck.

There are other versions of this effect in which the set-aside card is instead sandwiched between two cards or four of a kind but none of these address the central problem. Only Ed Brown's version achieves a degree of isolation by placing the set-aside card in one compartment of a wallet while the other selections go into a different compartment. (However, see "The Dream Card" in *Darwin Ortiz at the Card Table* and "The Psychotronic Card" in *Cardshark* for examples of this type of effect that do observe the no-contact condition.)

Any survey of magical literature or any extended exposure to close-up magic will yield many more effects in which the no-contact condition is violated. In certain ace assemblies one of the follower packets must touch the leader packet. In some tricks in which the selected card is removed from the cardcase the case must first touch the deck. In some Cards Across effects the two packets must first be brought together.

My convictions about the importance of the no-contact condition to audiences are the result of very extensive performing experience and observation. I believe that anyone who experiments with different versions of the same effect will come to the same conclusion. Nevertheless, I realize my argument will meet strong resistance from many magicians.

The problem is that, when audiences think that lack of contact between point A and point B makes the trick harder to do, they're absolutely right. That's why so many versions of these effects do involve bringing points A and B together. While the inventors of these tricks presumably would argue that the no-contact feature doesn't matter to audiences, they will usually try to structure the effect so that points A and B touch for the least amount of time possible.

The bulk of what is published in magic books and magazines will always reflect what is easiest to invent, not what is most effective to perform. The bulk of what most magicians perform will always reflect what is easiest to do, not what has the strongest impact on an audience. For example, since most magicians are scared to death of palming a card, non-palming card-to-wallet tricks will continue to be popular and that will usually mean bringing the wallet in contact with the deck or openly inserting extraneous cards into the wallet or your pocket prior to removing the signed selection. These versions may lack the conviction, and sometimes the clarity and directness, achieved by the palming approaches, but they're a heck of a lot easier to do. You'll have to decide for yourself where your priorities lie.

DRAMATIZING CONDITIONS

I trust that by now you appreciate the vital role conditions play in maximizing audience impact. However, conditions will only affect an audience if you make sure the audience notices them and appreciates their implications. They must appreciate them not only intellectually but also on an emotional level. The key to giving conditions emotional impact is dramatizing.

The best place to see creative examples of such dramatizing is television commercials. Advertising companies first determine what feature of a product they want the audience to appreciate. Then they figure out a way to communicate that feature to an audience in a dramatic fashion. They don't just tell people about the feature, they show them in some memorable way.

Practically every commercial you see illustrates this approach. If they want you to appreciate that a car provides a smooth ride, they have a diamond cutter cut an expensive diamond in the backseat of the car while driving over a bumpy road. If they want you to appreciate how securely a plastic food storage bag seals, they fill the bag with angry bees. If they want you to see how powerful a vacuum cleaner is, they show it sucking up steel nuts and bolts.

You have to learn to sell the conditions of your effects the way Madison Avenue sells the features of its products—in ways that reach the viewer’s gut, not just his intellect.

Don’t try to dramatize every condition of the effect or you’ll just dissipate the impact of this technique. The must-believe test will help you here. The conditions that relate to what the audience must believe in order for the trick to be a miracle are the ones to dramatize. Through Actions: Consider the “Ultra-Mental Deck” effect where the performer shows that he predicted a freely thought-of card by previously reversing that card in the deck. The impact of this trick depends entirely on the audience being convinced that the performer couldn’t possibly have foreseen the spectator’s choice. Magician Chet Miller would dramatize this point by having a spectator randomly selected from the audience, then sending that person to a pay phone with instructions to telephone any acquaintance within a one-hundred mile radius to ask him to name a card. How could audiences fail to appreciate the impossibility of his foreseeing this distant stranger’s choice? (The one—hundred mile limitation is a clever example of the illogical convincer concept we’ll be discussing later.)

In presenting this same effect, Al Koran would have a spectator think of any card. He would then tell him to forget that card and think of another one. He would then tell him to forget this second card and think of yet another one. It was this third

thought-of card that Koran would show he had predicted. As he would point out in his patter, how could he possibly have foreseen what card a spectator would arrive at after changing his mind twice? This kind of thinking means nothing to the magician concerned only with methods, but it can make all the difference in the world to the performer who wants maximum audience impact.

In some card effects, it's important that the audience appreciate the fact that the cards were shuffled by a spectator at the outset. A simple but effective way to dramatize this is to ask three different spectators to shuffle consecutively.

Harry Houdini was a master of dramatizing conditions. In his "Milk Can Escape" the most important condition was the fact that he was under water; he couldn't breathe until he escaped. To dramatize this, he would begin by asking how many people in the audience thought they could hold their breaths for one minute. After a show of hands, he would ask everyone to hold their breaths while he timed them. Spectator after spectator would eventually give up, desperately gasping for breath.

Later, when Houdini was struggling to escape, a large clock would count off the seconds. With the memory of their own experience fresh in their minds, the audience's alarm would grow as the time went far past the point where they had been able to hold their breaths. No other presentational approach could ever have gotten them to feel what Houdini must be going through the way this one did.

When Houdini did the escape from seventy-five feet of rope he would have an assistant time how long it took the audience volunteers to tie him up. Then he would announce that he would escape from the ropes in less time than it had taken them to restrain him. If he had simply announced that he would

escape in, say, four minutes, it would have meant little to the audience. His ploy reduced that abstract fact to terms they could understand.

Through Audience Participation: One of the generally most versatile and effective methods of dramatizing a condition is to have the audience enforce that condition. How many times have you heard a layperson finish a glowing description of an effect he's witnessed with a comment such as, "And I shuffled the cards myself," or, "And it was Joe's deck of cards!"

One of the things that makes the "McDonald's Aces" the most powerful of all ace assemblies is the fact that the performer never touches the leader packet until the very end. You could dramatize this condition by placing a paperweight on the leader packet at the start of the trick. The paperweight would not be removed until the end. Alternatively, you could dramatize the condition by having a spectator place her hand on the packet, warning her not to lift her hand for even an instant until you ask her to at the end of the trick. Logically, both methods are just as good at proving that you don't tamper with the packet during the trick. Yet, emotionally, having the spectator place her hand on the cards will be much more convincing.

An extremely effective item I always perform when I have the opportunity to work with a borrowed deck is the "Blind Aces" effect I mentioned earlier. After the borrowed deck has been shuffled by a spectator I take it and proceed to cut to the four aces. I do this while blindfolded. Only I don't use a blindfold. Instead, as I'm sitting at the table, I have a female spectator stand behind me and cover my eyes with her hands. This offers an advantage in pacing since it takes far less time than most blindfolds require to put on and take off. It also eliminates the time-consuming process of having a blindfold tested by

audience members before the start of the trick to prove that it's not gimmicked; the spectator's hands are above suspicion.

My main reason for taking this approach, however, is that having an audience member "enforce" my blindness is the strongest way I can dramatize the sightless condition under which the effect is performed. If you think it makes no difference if the trick is done with a cloth blindfold or a "human" blindfold you still haven't grasped the central fact that strong magic is about emotion, not logic. If you do appreciate the difference, start looking for ways to dramatize key conditions of an effect by having the audience "police" those conditions themselves. You'll start hearing laypeople glowingly recount your effects to others, ending with comments like, "And I never took my eyes off that box," or, "And they never let go of his wrists," or, "And she covered his eyes the whole time!"

Through Images: Never underestimate the power of mere words to forcefully drive home a point. For best effect these words should evoke concrete images in a spectator's mind. The abstract speaks to the intellect; the concrete image speaks to the emotions and instincts.

That's why a charity will select an annual poster child. They know they can cite statistics about thousands of children suffering won't move most people to action because statistics appeal only to the intellect. Yet a photograph of a single child in need will get people to donate because it's a concrete image that cuts directly to the emotions. That's what you have to achieve with your words.

The technique of dramatizing through words is very similar to those used by poets. The poet employs metaphors, similes, and evocative imagery to go beyond communicating with the reader's intellect and reach his emotions. The creative showman

will do the same to make the spectator appreciate the key conditions of an effect in his gut as well as in his brain.

An appreciation for, and use of, presentational angles of this kind is one of the features that most distinguishes professional performers from amateurs. When two professional close-up workers have a session, they're more likely to trade the kind of presentational bits I've been describing than new moves or effects.

In fact, I've found it a quick and reliable way of sizing up other magicians. If I describe to a magician a dramatizing ploy that I know to be strong and his eyes light up, I know I'm talking to a performer. If, instead, he stares at me blankly, or gives me a puzzled look as if trying to figure out just what my point is, I know I'm dealing with a hobbyist who does most of his performing for other magicians.

Once you start thinking in terms of dramatizing conditions many ideas will occur to you. Opportunities for dramatizing the conditions of an effect are limited only by your imagination. This area as much as any indicates why presentation offers as much room for creativity as inventing new moves or effects.

CONVINCERS

A technique at the other extreme from the dramatization of conditions but which aids in the same ultimate goal is the use of convincers. I first ran across the term "convincers" in the writings of Harry Lorayne. Many people use the word "subtleties" to refer to the same thing, but I prefer the term convector because it underscores the purpose of the technique, which is to strengthen conviction.

Where dramatizing is a big production, convincers are a small touch. Where dramatizing is clearly conscious and deliberate, convincers are off-handed, seemingly uncalculated. That is, in fact, their greatest strength.

Darwin Ortiz

Strong Magic

1994

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Construction of magic seems quite technical when you attempt to articulate it on paper. The truth is, these constructions begin in our mind, often with a dream. Next, Tommy Wonder urges us to embrace this dream-like visualization technique, and learn to harness its power.

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THE MIND MOVIE

BY TOMMY WONDER,
WITH STEPHEN MINCH

In the two volumes of this work, at various times I will talk about the *mind movie*. This is a very important tool for me, and I consider it an essential guide to quality performance. Whenever I wish to create a new effect, it starts of course with an idea that occurs to me. I then begin to consider the idea, pondering it and looking at the effect from every angle I can imagine. I try to discover as much as I possibly can about it. Even if the effect is totally original and unlike anything that has come before, there are still many details to be ferreted out. Then eventually, slowly perhaps, yet surely, an ideal version of the effect begins to take shape in my mind.

So far I'm not in the least concerned about *modus operandi*. Instead, I think of the effect as if anything is possible. My imagination is without limits. I'm unfettered by such realistic thoughts as "Yeah, but how can I do this?" By constantly rethinking the effect, imagining myself doing it again and again, my misty idea grows into something crystal clear. After a time I will know every movement, every word, every gesture. I will know exactly how the effect will be.

To aid myself in this process of applied imagination, I will frequently run through the effect physically. Often I gather the necessary props and use them during these fantasy rehearsals. One valuable thing that comes from this practice is that I quickly discover any awkward spots. A handling sequence may consume more time than I imagined; or I might find that some procedure must be changed due to the props. Yet, even now I don't care about methods. Anything is possible!

For several years I have been the happy possessor of a video camera. I've found it a good idea to tape my fantasy rehearsals several times on video. With a tape of my dream, it is easier to envision it and to detect any rough spots.

Of course I can't really do the effect, because I don't yet know how it will be accomplished; but that doesn't bother me. Suppose that during the effect something must vanish from my hand. In my fantasy practices I just drop the prop on the floor while pantomiming its vanish, and continue as if the disappearance has happened by truly magical means. I'm still not trying to work out the secret method that will eventually accomplish the effect. That process comes much, much later. All I want now is to make my dream as concrete as possible. My thoughts must become totally clear. The clearer the desired effect is in my mind, the easier it will be to achieve later.

After doing these exercises for a time, the effect becomes like a movie for me, very solid and clear in my thoughts. I know exactly what the ideal version of the effect looks like. All I need to do now is push it from the womb of my imagination into reality. However, now I know exactly – with no compromise to little things like methodological concerns – what I want to achieve. I have a beautifully defined goal.

Not thinking about certain practical matters at this stage is essential. Don't consider, for instance, whether the effect is possible. That would only limit your freedom of imagination and creativity. If at this point you take into account certain practical matters linked to possible methods, you will no longer be able to strive for an ideal trick. Your mind movie would be flawed by concessions. The mind movie must grow within an unbound imagination. It is governed only by your taste, by what you like, by what you see as the most splendid goals of magic. This is the truly creative stage.

I use the mind movie as a tool in almost every phase of the development of an effect. The movie tells me what direction to take. It even tells me when I'm going wrong, or if the adjustments I make are too broad. It is my measure for almost everything concerning the effect. The mind movie tells me what to strive for.

I cannot stress too much the importance of such mind movies. These movies free your imagination and allow you to approach your maximum potential for beauty in your magic. A further benefit of such movies is that you are free in them to be yourself. *This is essential*, your self-portrayal in your mind movies should be a faithful representation of your personality and your means of sharing your imagination with an audience. Your audiences will be able to experience your imagination and *you*. They will not experience a pale recreation of someone else's imagination, or a hobbled version of your imagination. It will be a sincere, honest sharing of your dreams with the audience. You cannot share more. That is the ultimate!

Tommy Wonder
The Books of Wonder
1996

PARTNINE



GET YOUR ACT
TOGETHER

"THOSE PEOPLE WISHING TO BE THE
BEST AT SOMETHING GENERALLY NEED
TO HAVE ONE FOOT PLANTED IN THAT
AREA OF INTEREST, BUT ANOTHER
ROOTED FIRMLY IN THE REST OF LIFE."

-DERREN BROWN

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Roberto Giobbi begins our discussion with an analysis of how to assemble several effects into a routine or act.

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CONSTRUCTION

BY ROBERTO GIOBBI

CHOICE OF REPERTOIRE

On what basis should tricks be chosen to create a program? I agree with the motto of the cigar magnate, Zino Davidoff: *“In life, human beings must learn to be satisfied with the best,”* and with Oscar Wilde when he said, *“I have a very simple taste – from everything the best!”* Only the best tricks are good enough to form a part of your programs. Ask yourself the following questions:

DO I LIKE THE TRICK MYSELF? Only perform tricks that appeal to you, as these are the only ones you can present with enthusiasm and conviction. All too often performers choose to do tricks simply because they have seen someone else achieve success with them on television.

DOES IT FIT MY STYLE? If there is no way to modify a trick to conform to your style, don't try to add it to your program. It must fit you as a person if it is to fit into your program.

IS IT A WELL-CONSTRUCTED TRICK? Dai Vernon said: *“Perform only tricks that you would do if you really could do magic.”*

WHAT PURPOSE DOES IT SERVE IN THE PROGRAM? If your program has a theme, then every trick must function in relation to it. If a trick does not fit into the concept of your program, then no matter how good the trick is, it will seem out of place and will detract from the quality of the other tricks.

IS THIS THE BEST METHOD I KNOW TO ACCOMPLISH THIS EFFECT? This requires you to do a bit of research. When you have found several methods for an effect, don't choose the easiest, but the one that will have the greatest impact on the audience. If a gimmicked card is required, get one—but if you must do a pass, learn it. The old exhortation that only the effect matters, not the method, shouldn't serve as an excuse to choose the easiest method. If the best method isn't used, the effect suffers; and the best method is not always the easiest.

The choice of repertoire for a program is very important, more so than even some experienced performers believe it to be. Every insubstantial trick used weakens all the others, whereas every strong trick enhances the rest.

If you have to choose five tricks, ask yourself what the five best card tricks are. Forget everything else and add only these five tricks to your repertoire.

VARIOUS EFFECT CATEGORIES

The routines and tricks in a program must belong to different categories of effects. Therefore, it's important that we clarify what these categories are.

Appearance, disappearance, transformation, transposition, penetration, location, destruction and restoration, telepathy, clairvoyance,

precognition, telekinesis—virtually all effects are variations of these themes.

A good routine is already a combination of several of these effects. For example, “The Ambitious Card” routine in this book incorporates the first five effects listed above.

Each category of effect should only be represented once on a program, unless each repetition of effect represents a significantly more impressive demonstration.

THE PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Next we will discuss the structure of a classical program from a theoretical perspective. At the end of each element you will find concrete examples using tricks from this course.

THE OPENING. The function of the opening is to focus attention, introduce yourself and break the ice. This can be done verbally, but is best accomplished in conjunction with a visual trick, one with a simple structure. It is useful to introduce some well-thought-out humor here, as laughter is the fastest way to dissipate any initial tension. The opening can be a gag lasting ten to twenty seconds, or it can be a short, complete trick.

THE INTRODUCTION. Here you establish your personality and performing style. You consolidate your relationship with the audience. A good trick with some light spectator involvement, such as having someone say stop or choose a number, is ideal here, but it shouldn't be a fully participatory exercise. This allows you to gauge individuals' reactions and their communication skills.

THE MIDDLE (EARLY). Now the audience is on your side and you can really get started. One or two especially strong tricks

or routines, which may have a complex structure, are suitable. Audience participation is very important here.

THE MIDDLE (LATE). Here tricks with a mental or occult presentation work well. Such effects are both baffling and mysterious.

FINALE. The concluding trick must be the most impressive in the program. It can be somewhat longer, but must have a clear, simple structure. Strong effects with active audience participation and many possible audience reaction-points are ideal. This is the climax to your program, in which you exert all your abilities to make your appearance memorable.

Like a classical play, this program consists of five parts. This is a tried and true recipe, allowing for the greatest possible range of variety. If you have a large enough repertoire and like to improvise, you can determine what tricks you will use during the actual course of the performance, following this structure to guide your choices.

While there is no hard and fast rule, I believe it better for beginners to choose the tricks in their program in advance. This not only gives increased confidence in performance, but allows for the integration of methods in the various tricks—which often requires some thought and preparation.

NEW TRICKS IN THE PROGRAM

How often should the tricks in a program be changed—or should you always perform the tricks? The American master, Al Goshman, liked to say, *“Professionals always perform the same tricks for an ever-changing audience, while amateurs must constantly change tricks for the same audience.”* Ninety-five percent of the

readers of these books are amateurs in precisely this position. Here's a solution to this dilemma:

Fixed Tricks. Stick to certain tricks or an entire program for several years. This allows you to perfect those tricks over time, gradually mastering the material completely. The experience and understanding gained in the repeated performance of these tricks, along with growing technical and communicative skills, will enhance those effects that you eventually wish to add to your repertoire.

Choosing Performances. Once your friends and acquaintances know that you are a magician, they may call on you to perform when they get together. This would require that you always have something new to show them. The first two or three times, you may wish to honor their request. However, take care not to become the group's "court jester." This would be degrading both to you and to the art of magic. Choose your performances. Slydini advised, "A good general chooses his battleground," and Nate Leipzig admonished, "Don't ever perform unless coaxed," to assure that the group earnestly wants to see something. It is better sometimes not to perform at all; then later, possibly, you can give a half-hour program, perhaps one that is specially announced and by invitation only. This is much better than doing "something new" each time you are asked. The audience will grant you and your art more admiration and respect.

Avalanche Invitations. Find a new audience for yourself. All you need do is invite seven or eight friends for a drink, with the promise of some magic afterward. This can be cocktails after work or after an evening meal. After such a casual performance, ask your friends at the gathering to arrange such an evening at their homes with their friends as the guests. I recommend that you pick a firm date to set an avalanche of this sort in motion. This method has been used successfully by the magicians of *the*

Escuela Magica de Madrid to secure performances over the course of each year, during which they experiment with and study new tricks.

In general, it is better to try to find new audiences for the same tricks than to look for new tricks for the same audience.

IN CONCLUSION

An examination of the principles underlying the construction of a sturdy trick or routine is extremely useful. When you begin to put together a routine or even an extended program, the theoretical and practical insights we have discussed here will smooth your path to success. And should you ever desire to create new tricks, these principles can guide you in inventing good ones; and even more, they will help you to distinguish a well-constructed trick from a poor one.

Roberto Giobbi
Card College 2
1996

ROBERTO GIOBBI

Roberto Giobbi is one of magic's most decorated and erudite scholars. In addition to an illustrious performing career, Giobbi has written himself into the annals of magic with his *Card College* series of books. These five volumes, collectively, are the most widely translated books in the history of magic literature. Giobbi himself speaks five languages fluently, and he performs and lectures all over the world on his unique brand of card magic.



.....

How I wish that just before my first show, Eugene Burger had been looking over my shoulder, imparting this advice for my first performance.

.....

SECRETS

BY EUGENE BURGER

Can you keep a secret? Do you think I'm joking? I'm not.

As one who, as we say, “earns his living” entirely from the performance of close-up magic and sleight-of-hand for adults—in cocktail lounges and restaurants, and at corporate and private parties—I think secrets are important. Please don't treat them lightly.

I have long suspected, however, that the real secrets of close-up magic as a performing art have little to do with the position of your first finger and thumb during some sleight-of-hand maneuver, or with the latest card force, or even with some wonderfully exotic new way to “lap” an object (hopefully, not with your tongue hanging out!). These things are important, to be sure, for the performance of magic has a technical dimension which performers ignore at their own peril. Fifteen minutes spent with a performer who is unable to conceal the fact that he is doing “secret things” that one is evidently not supposed to know about—no, you don't know exactly what it is that he or she is doing, but you know in your heart-of-hearts that he is doing something “funny” if not downright sneaky—and you'll discover that fifteen minutes can be an eternity. (A friend once defined “eternity” as traveling from Minneapolis to Houston on

a Greyhound Bus—but, then, he had no experience watching magicians.) Such performers are exhausting for audiences because a good deal of the fun of watching magic is the element of surprise. As you watch a performer who constantly seems to be “messing around,” surprise itself begins to disappear from the scene.

But doesn't a magician need to “mess around?” How, after all, does one get a selected card to the top of the deck without, as you say, “messing around?” True. Yet if your performance is to be perceived as being magical (as opposed to feats of juggling), your audience simply must not be aware of these secret maneuvers—and that is the challenge of close-up magical performance, isn't it?

Performers meet this challenge by employing a variety of strategies that conjurers unfortunately have tended to lump together under the single name “misdirection.” These strategies—and there are many—are designed to so involve the audience in the theater of what is going on, in the dramatic plot and character that is being created, that they do not also perceive the “secret maneuvers” that the performer must invariably execute.

I am saying, then, that the real secrets of magic as a performing art have to do with making the effects that you already know really magical and entertaining for your audiences. These secrets deal with the ways in which you work with people so that your (hopefully, subtle) control over what they perceive is strengthened and your impact upon them is, thereby, sharpened and intensified.

There are many such secrets. Those that follow, while perhaps not even the “most” important are, nonetheless, strategies upon which close-up performers might do well to reflect.

But, first, you’ve got to draw the line somewhere!

By this I mean: As a magician you know the workings of a great many magical effects. But as a performer, you need to know exactly which effects you are capable of performing in an entertaining way before living, breathing people. These latter effects constitute your performing repertoire. Those other effects, while part of your knowledge and thinking, your mental accumulations, are not part of your performing repertoire.

The first step, then, is to find out exactly what your performing repertoire is. I am convinced that the easiest way to do this is to write it out and put it in your notebook. (You do have a notebook, don’t you?)

This listing of one’s performing repertoire is a tremendously therapeutic thing for most magicians to do. By writing it out, you see it in black and white. No confusion. And, in the process, you cut out all of the material that does not have much impact as you perform it. Granted, Jay Marshall’s “Lefty” is a classic routine from which you can learn every time you see it. If your routine with “Lefty” isn’t that good, drop it. (And if you don’t think that there are magicians who have ripped off Jay’s creation—and who perform it in the secret recesses of church basements at Father and Son Banquets, you have a “purer” view of these things than I do.)

You need to know exactly what your performing repertoire is. The easiest way is to write it out. When I became a full-time

professional magician some years ago, my performing repertoire consisted of six effects!

Now where did those six “new” effects (or “tricks” as we used to say in less racy times) come from? They weren’t new effects which I had purchased or which I had recently found in a book or magazine. They were, rather, effects which I had performed as a teenager and which I upgraded—that is to say, for which I worked out entertaining presentations—so they could become part of my performing repertoire.

The first and very basic step is to write out exactly what your repertoire is—in black and white—so you can see it. Once you’ve done that (and really do it), ask yourself what, from the material you have just cut, do you now want to work on and add to your repertoire.

Start with the material that you have reluctantly cut as you listed your repertoire. (You see, we haven’t even gotten to the books yet, have we?) As an aside, let me add that two of the greatest needs of all speaking performers are a blue pencil (to edit your script or presentation) and a wastebasket in which to throw all the paper that will quickly begin to accumulate. Our aim here is to have in our repertoires only that material which is strong; not items that are passable, but only the strong.

This really is a challenge because, in magic, there is a great deal of junk: dreadful, awful, non-magical or even puzzling material. There is so much that is stupid and dumb and which doesn’t fool people or sometimes even entertain them.

Why do it? Why be seen performing magic of this caliber?

When Doug Henning was performing his marvelous show in Chicago in August, 1981 (a show, I might add, that was far

more wonderful than any of his TV specials—especially in communicating Doug’s personality which, on the TV shows, too often seemed to me to be buried in “Happy Valley” children’s magic scripts), he did the usual round of local television talk shows. On the NBC affiliate, he was interviewed by Jorie Lueloff, a bright and tough lady who isn’t at all shy about interrupting performers and asking to check out that deck (as I discovered from personal experience at a party I worked which she attended) or asking some other, potentially embarrassing, question. Doug performed a cut and restored pocket handkerchief effect wherein the handkerchief was twirled by its diagonal corners. Jorie cut it in half, Doug put the pieces together and pulled the (opposite) diagonal comers and twirled it again—showing the handkerchief “restored.” Jorie immediately asked: “Aren’t you going to open it out?” Silence. She repeated: “Aren’t you going to open it out?” Doug replied: “I only open it out when I use it.”

As I watched, I could only think to myself: Why didn’t he do the torn and restored cigarette paper—or any one of the sleight-of-hand miracles that he has done on TV and is tremendously capable of doing so very well? This version of the cut and restored handkerchief just isn’t that strong— particularly for a close-up demonstration where a spectator’s questions can be as spontaneous as breathing. Perhaps on a stage where your audience can’t talk back. Perhaps.

I tell this story not to embarrass Doug Henning, who, aside from being a most excellent performer, is also a very real part of the reason that I and many other close-up magicians work as much as we do. I tell this story because we all can learn from each other’s experiences. And so I would say, throw out the junk! Never, ever do it again!

You might, of course, reply that one man’s junk is another man’s treasure. Really? When I look back over the years on the many

packages that I received in the mails from magic dealers, I begin to wonder.

In any event, throw out what you perceive as junk and keep in your performing repertoire only what you perceive as treasure. You've got to draw the line somewhere.

When you select material for your performing repertoire, always choose items that you find challenging enough to keep you from becoming bored by repeated performance.

And always select material that you find entertaining.

As a rule of thumb: Always entertain yourself! The simple fact is, if you are being entertained by what is happening, your audiences will "catch" your enthusiasm and energy—somewhat like catching measles or chicken pox from a carrier.

If there are effects that make you nervous when you perform them, stop performing them!

Spare your audiences!

If you really want to do them, start working on them until you reach that point where you can perform them without being uncomfortably nervous. And, if that point never comes, never ever do them before an audience! The impact of a close-up performance is cumulative.

One bad apple can spoil the bushel.

One or two weak effects (and you performing them) will weaken your impact.

And “impact” is what performing is all about.

Draw the line!

NAMES

When I sit down at a table to perform magic for strangers, the very first thing I want to do is find out their names—just their first names. Knowing a person’s name is power.

If you examine the history of the occult tradition—especially its manifestations in the areas of sorcery, voodoo, or ritual magic—you will find this age-old principle of identification. The microcosm is identified with the macrocosm. The individual is identified (in a strong rather than weak sense) with his or her name. Thus, what might happen to a piece of parchment upon which the person’s name is inscribed is believed by some to have influence over the person himself. In much the same way, what might happen to a lock of the person’s hair or to his fingernail parings in a voodoo ritual is believed to have influence over the person himself—because the hair, the fingernail parings, the name, whatever, are identified in this strong, magical sense with the person.

In ancient Israel, the name of God was never spoken because, it was believed, to do so would be to assume power over God—which in Jewish, like Christian, theology is considered blasphemy. I remember when I taught university courses in philosophy and comparative religion how many of my Jewish students, when writing the word “God” on an examination, would write “G-d”—a carry-over from these beliefs about the power of names.

Knowing a person’s name is power.

Consider, for example, the art of card palming. A good deal of my card work hinges on being able to palm a card off the top of the deck. Even a few cursory glances through the conjuring literature will convince you that there are many, many, many different ways of doing this—with your fingers in all sorts of positions. What does it all mean?

It means, I suggest, that there isn't any one right way to palm a card—or, more precisely, while there isn't any one right way in general, there may be one or two right ways for you.

You have to discover them for yourself. You can't look to an author to do it for you. But, if you enjoy these things, discovering what is best for you is a good deal of the fun of doing it all.

You can relax because it all depends upon you rather than in trying to imitate what someone else says or does. It is interesting and sometimes instructive to see how other people do it, of course, but in the last analysis it all depends upon you, upon the size of your hands, upon the situation which you are creating, and upon how much you as a performer can (or can't) get away with.

The important thing about card palming is that you relax (really!) and not make a capital “P” problem out of it. What you are saying and what your eyes are doing is more important than what your fingers are doing. Think about it.

I want to palm a card and one of the spectators is really watching the deck. I wait. Malini said to “wait a week” if necessary. Interesting in theory: difficult in practice. If you're working in a restaurant, or lounge, or at a party (and you're getting paid

to perform), you don't have two weeks! Sorry. Your audience wants you to get on with it.

Here comes the point: Use the spectator's name!

Ask him a question: "Well, John, did you see the card?" John looks up. His eyes meet your eyes. You palm the card. The deed is done.

John always looks up when he hears his name. (Remember Pavlov's salivating puppies?) People deeply enjoy hearing the sound of their own names. It's very predictable.

Knowing a person's name is power.

Not only that. Using spectators' names helps generate a sense of familiarity and fun in this space between the audience and the performer in which magical things are being created. Using their names contributes to the ambiance and people begin to relax and have fun. And, you've got them! Now there is, of course, what I shall call the Age Factor: a twenty-year-old performer asking a sixty-ish woman her first name might very well be perceived in certain circles as being in poor taste. It's a bit too familiar. You need to be alert to things like this. Even now, in my forties, when performing before individuals who strike me as being rather formal, I might very well not ask their names.

Generally, however, as one gets older, one can get away with a good deal more rather than less. (How exciting!)

One of the very real problems of younger (under 30 years of age) close-up is that their presentations are often designed for (and would be effective for) an older performer.

One evening a year or so ago, Jay Marshall, Phil Willmarth, and I took a reporter from Chicago Elite magazine on a tour of Chicago magic bars. We started with the inimitable—and, unfortunately, generally unknown to the magic fraternity—Ernie Spence. It is our loss, for I can't even begin to tell you about this unique and most wonderful performer. He runs and "owns" (as a concession) the bar in a popular and large suburban restaurant. Ernie's routine with "Glorpy" and a young man and woman is "fall-off-the-bar-stool-laughing" material. Really! Much, much later that evening (actually, the next morning) Jay and I finished up with a nightcap at the New York Lounge. One of the younger performers there did Ernie Spence's routine (which, he said, Ernie had taught him). It just didn't play that well. The performer was too young.

Another great danger for the younger performer is appearing to be a show-off or being perceived as an egotistical brat. Most people (parents excluded) just don't find show-offs or brats entertaining. Younger performers need to reflect upon the implications of the Age Factor.

In any restaurant, lounge, or club where I have been employed any length of time, people sooner or later comment on the number of people I know. Every such establishment has "regulars," some so regular you wonder how they can take the monotony of the same place all the time.

I can't tell you how to remember their names. I like people generally and tend to remember little things about them. If you need more help than that, start with Harry Lorayne's book, *Remembering People: The Key to Success*.

Remember, knowing a person's name is power.

CONTACT

There is mental contact. Contact between your mind and the spectator's. To a great extent in close-up magic, I see this as a function of two elements: your script or presentation (what you are saying and what the spectators take this to mean) and your eyes.

Need I tell you that magical power resides in the eyes? If you don't understand this, look at the portraits of any one of a number of famous individuals in occult history and you'll get the picture (as it were).

Eye contact is extraordinarily important for successful close-up entertainers. Learn to look at your spectators, look into their eyes. Make contact! Smile when you do. If they are looking back, they can't be "burning" your hands, can they? Remember, it is a magical maxim that spectators will look where you do.

Are you shy about looking people in the eyes?

Many performers appear to be. Their gaze is fixed, rather, on their own hands or they stare off into space. ("Spacey?") They avoid meeting their audiences at what are potentially the most powerful points: the eyes. Learn to look into their eyes.

Further there is physical contact – *touching*.

A few years ago, I conducted the following experiment. When I performed at tables that included two ladies, I would lightly touch one of them and not the other – a light touch on the hand or arm, innocent, done for emphasis, not sexual - and I found that those who were touched seemed more involved than those who were not.

Now I touch almost everyone!

One day at lunch, Phil Willmarth pointed out that a visitor rarely leaves Schulien's Restaurant in Chicago without Charlie Schulien touching him in a natural and friendly way. A pat on the shoulder. Shaking hands. Some form of non-sexual physical contact.

Of course, there are those magicians who say that you shouldn't do this—that you should never physically touch anyone, never enter into that very personal space—much as there are those who say you should never ask to borrow money from a spectator. It's all just too personal.

Well, I for one don't believe it. As far as physical touching goes, you can gear your work to the neurotics out there who have hidden fears regarding human contact, but do you want to? (If you are the one who is hung up about touching, however, of course you shouldn't do it. Too bad.)

The television program Nova told of an experiment conducted with the staff of a public library. People were surveyed leaving the library on two separate days. Every effort was made to treat people the same on both days—with one exception. On one day, each librarian or staff member who checked out a book, accepted a payment or fine, etc., was careful to casually touch the person involved in the transaction. On the other day, equal care was taken not to touch them in any way. When the two surveys were checked as to people's impressions of the friendliness of the library staff, significantly more people rated them higher on friendliness on the day when people were being touched. Makes sense to me!

The vast majority of people really are no longer up-tight about this kind of touching at all. In fact, as I have said, I personally

find that people get caught up in my work all the more through using this strategy of gentle touching. And, if you should end up with someone who seems to react negatively after you have innocently touched the back of his or her closed hand with your extended forefinger for emphasis (or whatever), then draw back a bit in an easy way that isn't obvious to anyone else, retain a pleasant attitude, and continue on with the effect.

If you are at all aware, you will spot the people who don't want you to enter into their space at all. Respect them.

Again, please remember the Age Factor. You don't want the gentleman to think that you're trying to make off with his date. Gentlemen seldom find that entertaining.

NOT HEARING

I have long thought that foreign-born performers—performers whose primary language is not English—have a certain built-in advantage over native-born speakers of the language. The foreign-born person can “not quite understand” what has just been said, as he leans forward, and the sleight is accomplished. A native-born speakers of the language, however, one can always not hear what has been said.

Like any strategy, this one needs to be used prudently.

You ask a spectator a question. He responds. You didn't quite hear him. You ask him to repeat it. You lean forward toward the spectator.

As your attention thus focuses on the spectator and what he is being asked to repeat, the attention of the other spectators

becomes so focused as well. Your hands recede in the audience's awareness and the deed is done.

Try not hearing sometime.

ENERGY

One of my favorite television programs is William Alexander's "The Magic of Oil Painting" on PBS. I have not personally done any oil painting probably in 25 years, but I watch this program quite regularly because I find it "educational" in the deeper sense of that word. Alexander is a wonderful teacher and he has much to say and show that ought to be of interest to close-up magicians.

Basically, during each half hour "class," he paints a complete picture—typically, a grand nature scene in which there might appear waterfalls and mountains, great pine forests, thunderous rivers, and always the marvelous sky.

In his teaching, he is anxious that his student get on with it and not take years to complete one painting. Too often, he says, students ruin their paintings by not knowing when to stop. (Getting the message?) While painting, he talks about light and color, depth and movement, about the tools of his craft, about the creation of illusion through various visual techniques, and about life in general—about pain and suffering and about enjoying what we have as opposed to putting our energy into what we want.

Alexander himself is a wonderful performer. Not only does he complete his painting in the 28 minutes allotted, he does this with tremendous energy and enthusiasm. He is a delight to watch. He quite obviously loves painting and he invests his canvases—and the nature scenes they suddenly begin to depict—with very great importance. The secrets of the cosmos

loom in those rushing waters and Zen laughter must be lurking in those wind-blown pines.

A magical effect is much like a painting that is being created. There is, at the beginning, a blank canvas. Then the artist begins to work his wonders with his material, and the result is a finished painting.

You should invest your work with importance.

If you don't, no one else will.

As a field trip in the development of your craft, go to a liturgically "high" Roman Catholic or Anglican Church and watch the priest handle the various objects. Or go to an Orthodox service (Russian, Greek, etc.) and go on a feast day or day that is liturgically "special." In such religious services, the objects are displayed and handled with great reverence. They are not just tossed about or handled roughly.

When I perform "Card Warp," for example, I begin by saying, "*This is one of the greatest card tricks of the Twentieth Century.*" I'm investing the proceedings with importance. Spectators move a bit closer. They want to *see* this.

Yet one of the problems with a good deal of the close-up magic one sees is not the magic but, rather, the fact that the performers themselves don't seem to have much energy, much enthusiasm, sometimes even much interest in what is happening. The *pace* of the show begins to drag.

Magic-as-performed, to be magical, needs to be invested with importance. A little urgency, please! Something is *happening* here!

When magic is performed as a “throw away,” the result might be comical, but it is seldom magical.

If you invest the proceedings with a sense of importance, with energy, you may find that your audiences become much more enthusiastic as well, and that is the beginning of impact.

SILENCE

Sometimes just being quiet for a moment ... slowing down .. stimulates increased audience attention.

Expectations are generated.

Drama is born.

Woo-Woo. (An American Indian term referring to the cosmic, mind-shattering, and earth-shaking dimensions of the Unknown.)

Audiences love Woo-Woo. Heavy breathing, a mystic pass, a deep gaze.

They want you to be a little “farther out” than they are.
The dramatic pause.

Silence.

One shouldn't talk too much about silence.

One should use it.

When I was growing up, magic dealers' catalogs very often assured the budding performer with the following words:

“No Practice Necessary” and “No Skill Required.” How ignorant!

Ignorant—in the word’s real sense of ignoring the critical importance of presentation for “magic tricks” to play well before an audience, presentation always requires both practice and certain theatrical skills.

It doesn’t matter whether one is talking about doing the “Zig-Zag” or your favorite card trick.

Practice is always necessary and skill is always required.

Magic, after all, is an art.

Let us distinguish between practice and rehearsal.

We practice the parts.

We rehearse the whole.

We rehearse a routine whose component parts have been practiced.

Each part of a routine is practiced—each sleight or move. Practice involves repetition: the sleight is done over and over until the fingers can do what they need to do without effort or strain, without signaling to those spectators who have not dozed off that you are doing “something funny.” You might—and probably do—conduct practice sessions without talking, without speaking your lines (your script) that you will use when you actually perform the routine.

My script?

Yes, your script. I have never personally believed in the “inspiration-on-the-spot” theory of performing. According to that view, what is interesting about watching magic performed are the sleights themselves and how well or poorly they are done.

As far as the words the performer might utter while performing his sleights, he can just as well leave them undecided upon until the moment of performance itself—and he will be inspired “on the spot.”

Stated in this way, I can’t imagine that too many performers would subscribe to the “inspiration-on-the-spot” view. Very few would subscribe to it in theory at all. Personal observation has convinced me, however, that many close-up performers subscribe to it in practice because their words do not seem to have been thought-out much, if at all, before the performance. Close-up magic is a theatrical art. Art requires a certain precision. For this reason, I have always personally favored a written script for every effect. Write it out or put it on tape. Then you have it for future reference and, you might also find, as material in your repertoire changes and you drop certain routines, years later, when your memory fails, the routines will not be lost should you wish to work on them again.

Rehearsal means starting at the beginning of a routine and doing it exactly as if your audience was present—speaking out loud to those imaginary spectators. Starting at the beginning and continuing to the end.

Without stopping.

But what if I mess up? Don’t I stop and start over again at the beginning?

Absolutely not!

In rehearsal, you deal with any problems which arise just as if

you were performing before the President and First Lady.

You invoke whatever strategy seems appropriate.

What will you do now?

You keep going. (What else can you do?)

If this distinction between practice and rehearsal is understood and appreciated, we can see why there are so many awful magical performances. The reason (sadly) is that infrequent performance is the only rehearsal that many amateurs get. Many amateurs practice – but they seldom rehearse.

Rehearsing requires discipline.

Magic is a performing art, but it is also a solitary art which is learned – if it is learned – in the quiet hours spent alone with your props and your mirror. All art is solitary whether it is painting a picture or playing the piano. Art is always a solitary endeavor – even when it is culminated in interpersonal performance.

Try this.

Put yourself on a practice and rehearsal schedule for two months – times set aside specifically for practice and other times specifically for rehearsal – and, at the end of the two months, see how much you have learned and how your confidence has begun to grow. It really works, if you do.

Repetition, when done with awareness, produces polish.

But, it requires discipline.

IT'S DONE WITH MIRRORS

In the days when I was studying the history of oriental and western philosophy, I came across the following – very possibly apocryphal – story. It concerns Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, two saints of the Roman Catholic Church who lived in the Thirteenth Century. Both died, in fact, in 1260. Thomas had written *shelves* of books on the intricacies of theology and philosophy (speculating on such questions as, “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”), while Bonaventure was the more deeply contemplative, if not mystical, monk.

One day, so the story goes, Thomas visited Bonaventure in his monastery and eventually asked Bonaventure to show him his library. Bonaventure reportedly took Thomas into a small cell which contained a fairly uncomfortable-looking bed and, on the wall, a crucifix. Pointing to the crucifix, Bonaventure said, “That is my library!”

Eugene Burger

Secrets and Mysteries of the Close-up Entertainer

1982

EBERHARD RIESE

Eberhard Riese is a German magic director, and has coached nearly a dozen FISM-winning acts. In *Foundations* he teaches precisely how he goes about working with magicians to bring out themes, a focus to their magic, and their personalities.



Eugene's invaluable advice to us is to narrow our focus and avoid the pitfalls of over-saturation. With that in mind, we're ready to start thinking about putting together an act. But as Eberhard Riese tells us, this is not a solitary endeavor: it must be a group effort.

THE TEAM

BY EBERHARD RIESE

The scholar in his quiet chamber, the attic poet-pauper in a Spitzweg painting and the magician who invents, constructs and performs all his or her own effects - they all are, without exception, treasured fictions that ceased to exist a long time ago, if they ever did.

Poets formed literary clubs, artists established artist colonies. Modern experts aren't even entirely certain how many authors might be responsible for works credited to Shakespeare. Schiller and Goethe, for instance, regularly exchanged letters discussing their drama sketches.

Alfred Doblin was a physician and a close friend of the Berlin police chief. His novel "Berlin Alexanderplatz" is based on events he witnessed on night patrol in police cars, on stories he was told by police officials and on the narratives of his patients. While taking the hospital lift up to his office on the way back from house calls, he always used to jot down new information and ideas in a few key words (on the back of his prescription pad).

Today, the philosophy of any company striving for success is based on the team spirit of its employees. Copperfield has and

always has had a creative team around him (including Don Wayne a.o.).

“One for all and all for one!” - was the motto of the Three Musketeers, introduced by Alexandre Dumas as a successful, powerful team that decides to make d’Artagnan a fourth member. And with this idea of a “team” the four swordsmen conquered the rest of the world, as did the novel.

Create a team of like-minded individuals and a network of specialists in various areas!

The following role play game has been an integral part of my literature course for many years. Five pupils play responsible employees in a company. One is in charge of purchasing, another manages sales, and there is also a designer and an advertising copywriter. The company is in the doldrums and the boss wants to throw the towel if the team doesn’t manage to come up with some excellent new ideas in 15 minutes. Then he leaves the room.

At first, the pupils work individually, but then they work as a team and also develop ideas collaboratively. The consistent result in over 20 years: the team is always better than any individual.

Oh yes, I forgot to mention: the company produces garden gnomes ...

It is quite unbelievable how many innovative and unusual ideas have been generated in all these years: singing garden gnomes, do-it-yourself garden gnomes, Chinese (and black) garden gnomes, Elvis Presley or Marilyn Monroe look-alike garden gnomes, garden gnomes modeled on photographs of friends and acquaintances to order, even former German chancellor

Helmut Kohl was deemed a promotional boon by our pupil teams...

Working in a team can give rise to several advantages. And it is always advisable to make use of these!

But who should be in the team? The answer: whosoever wishes to be. You will just as much need fellow magicians or neighborhood friend as you might require the DIY-enthusiast from around the corner or your spouse. Plus a few others. All these people will enrich the fruit of your thoughts. Beware though: don't let the teams become too large, five or six individuals should be the limit, and more than that and the team's efficiency would start to suffer.

The three most important advantages of team work:

Everybody in the team gives and takes, everybody enjoys the same advantages.

All team members contribute their individual personalities, including all their knowledge and skills.

Nice meetings, new friends!

No financial interests!

Psychologists have demonstrated that a brainstorming team produces better solutions faster than a single person.

What one would term "creative individuals" can be classed in six different types.

The visionary has ideas, pushes the envelope and is highly interested in social contacts.

The discoverer has a penchant for things and processes. He is often good with his hands and tends to avoid social situations. His attention is predominantly focused on realizing the ideas.

The analyst (extroverted) and the adaptor (introverted) take things apart, structure and simplify them, and are often order fanatics.

The organist plans with foresight, but prefers to leave activities to the doer.

The doer is a person of action who likes to act fast, can hence appear impetuous and is sometimes a little egotistical.

Eberhard Riese

Foundations

2006

Working with a team means, above all, giving honest feedback. Magicians are notoriously bad at this. Mike Caveney authored this brilliant parody on what to say to a terrible magician after a show.

TOP TEN BACK-HANDED COMPLIMENTS
TO USE AFTER WATCHING A HORRIBLE
MAGICIAN

By Mike Caveney

10. I loved the finish.
9. Were you ever good.
8. If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it.
7. You took my breath away.
6. Nobody does that kind of magic like you.
5. You certainly have grand illusions.
4. You've got talent you haven't even used.
3. You should have been in the audience.
2. I expected the magic to be good but you really fooled me.
1. You were never better.

MAGIC Magazine
October, 1994

We have spent a great deal of pages and time exploring all the variables in our show that we control, but what about outside forces? David Kaye views these outside distractions through the lens of a children's magician—where these forces are at their most extreme. But between the lines, we can gain valuable insight into how to avoid similar distractions for any audience in any venue.

DISTRACTION PROGRESSION THEORY

BY DAVID KAYE

It is exactly 8:07 p.m. The lights dim in the Broadway theater where the latest hit show is playing. The 850 people, who each paid \$100, politely settle into their aligned seats and become quiet. The 20-piece orchestra plays the overture as the ushers show the latecomers to their seats. Three minutes later the curtain rises on cue. The actors know their parts, the sophisticated hydraulic system that controls the sets is in gear, the computers that control the lights are ready, and the audience is in for an enchanting evening of musical theater.

Ten blocks south, in Madison Square Garden, 20,000 fans of Dave Matthews are getting restless. They each paid between \$67 and \$1,000 to see him, and they know the show will be starting any minute now. But not to worry. The 300 paid security guards won't let the situation get out of hand. Even after the concert starts the guards will form a human fence around the stage to keep excited fans away from the musicians. Meanwhile, Matthews is backstage in the comfort of his VIP dressing room resting up for the concert. And he is not alone. He is with his family and the other musicians in the band. Besides, the big screen television system will ensure that everyone will see each detail in Dave's face as he sings, and the multi-million dollar lighting and sound system will enhance his every move.

The next day children's magician Silly Billy carries his 80-pound trunk up the stairs of the subway and pushes it six blocks to the apartment building where 6-year old Lillie Hughes is having her birthday party. The guests, 20 6-year-olds, have arrived early, so Silly Billy must set up his show while entertaining and deflecting the children. The room chosen for the show is littered with children's toys. It is a bit warm and a bit dark, but it will have to do.

During the show the 20 to 30 parents, who transported their little darlings, loudly catch up on all the latest gossip. Lillie's two year brother Drew decides to see how well-made Silly Billy's tricks are by tossing them about the room. And Lillie's 8-year old sister, Camille, apparently knows how every trick is done, and wants to share her knowledge with the rest of the guests.

What's wrong with this picture? When each of us performs a show, we are on our own. We have to control all the elements by ourselves. We are the performer, stage manager, lighting staff, sound guy, usher, and security. We do it all. And often that is not an easy task.

When you perform for children there can be many distractions that make it more difficult for them to concentrate than adults. Whether it's adults talking during your birthday party show or infants crying in a large theater, there just isn't the same respect for the kid show performer as there is for an adult theater experience.

When people sit in cushy seats in a dark theater, they are conditioned to respect the performer. Unfortunately, most kid shows are performed in living rooms, school gyms, outdoor parks, and the like. These are locations where people are accustomed to talking. Without the advantages of curtains, lighting, and seats, we have to control many aspects of the show ourselves.

Though adult magicians (magicians who perform for adults) consider performing magic for children to be easy, I believe it may be the most difficult type of magic show. When an adult magician does a bad show, the adults in his audience sit and applaud politely. When a children's magician does a bad kid show, the children tell him so and then get up and go play with the toys. The audience at an adult magic show sits in their seats (of course!). But at a kids' show, children will get up and grab or attack without warning.

Traveling around the country, lecturing at magic conventions, I've found an interesting pattern. At the end of my lecture, when I open the floor to questions, the first one that is usually asked is not about the magic. It is typically a question about keeping order during a kids show.

This section of the book is intended to give practical and theoretical advice on how to control all the elements at your performances. How to solve all the problems as well as the distractions. Although I am a magician, and this is written from the perspective of performing magic for children, the rules and concepts are applicable to many different forms of children's entertainment. You might be a storyteller, a puppeteer, a clown, a juggler, or a ventriloquist. If you are a solo performer without a staff; if you perform live for children and families in an informal, non-theatrical setting, you probably have the same problems we magicians have at our shows.

Well they aren't problems anymore.

THE SILLY BILLY DISTRACTION PROGRESSION

THEORY

I begin every performance with the expectation that it will be, what I call, a Perfect Show. A perfect show is when everything clicks; the magic is flawless, the kids are completely in my control, my ad-libs are funny for the adults, and the birthday child has the time of his life. If every show I do is perfect, then I will achieve a level of word of mouth that is 100 percent positive. To perform a perfect show you need two things, 1) a great act, and 2) control over your environment. I believe this is the first time that the issue of getting control over your environment has been addressed in such detail. By controlling your environment I mean creating the best conditions under which to perform. Many different elements can prevent your young audience from focusing completely on your performance. Some of the most common distractions we kid show performers encounter when we perform in peoples' homes are:

- The room is too warm.
- The room is too dark.
- Children can't hear you.
- Toddlers walking around.
- Babies crying.
- Parents talking.
- Music playing in the background.
- Activity behind you.
- Family pets running around.
- Big brother heckling you.
- Food being served, eaten, and drinks spilled.

The Silly Billy Distraction Progression Theory says that: *The more distractions that exist during a performance, the harder it is to execute a perfect show.*

In order to do your best show, you have to reduce the number of distractions as much as you can. If you reduce the number of distractions to zero, you will do the best show possible. Any distractions that exist will prevent you from doing your best. That means keeping the parents quiet, keeping that two-year old out of your hair, turning off the parents' music, keeping big brother and his friends quiet, and so on.

At a minimum, distractions can irritate you, the performer. At a maximum, distractions can ruin your show.

David Kaye
Seriously Silly
2005

So far, you have narrowed your focus to just those effects you believe will be strongest in performance (thanks Eugene!). You assembled a team of about six people to help bounce ideas off of, or at least consult with (thanks Eberhard!). And as you begin to assemble your act, you remain mindful of all the distractions that you have to avoid during performance (thanks David!).

But above all, we must keep one simple goal in mind: with every show, our goal is to impart wonder.

MAKING CONTACT

BY DERREN BROWN

I worked as a magician for eight years before I realised what I was doing wrong. Two events made me stop and re-evaluate my performance. The first occurred at a magic convention in London when I met Eugene Burger, who was performing for some magicians at a bar table. I asked if I could join him. He reached over and shook my hand, gesturing for me to sit down. He introduced himself and asked my name, in that characteristic mellifluous blend of rich baritone timbre and erudite camp. I sat down, expectant and grinning like a big girl. “Now,” he stated in a voice that sounded like a Russian Orthodox mass played backwards at low speed, “I want you to pick a card...” Magic was afoot.

The second came as I reflected upon a conversation not dissimilar to many I had had before with a member of what we elegantly refer to as the “laity” as we peer down from the dizzy ecclesiastical heights of thaumaturgy. This chap, a guest at a function where I had been table-hopping, had told me of a trick that he had seen a magician perform some twenty years before in a bar. I forget the details of his wonderfully embellished version

of what I guessed to be the original performance, but some time later the chord struck.

I realised that the magic that I perform is the anecdote waiting to be told twenty years from now by my spectators.

The incident with Eugene Burger made me realise that my magic was missing the experience of wonder. There was no awareness of the emotive potential of magic waiting to happen. No welcoming of the spectator into something special. Mr. Burger deftly and unselfconsciously created a sense of something wondrous. The later reflection on the conversation after the function made me realise that I was not treating my magic with the respect that it deserved - that while I was just making sure that I got round all the tables before the speeches started, I was giving the guests something that they would probably never get again in their lives: most probably they would never see another magician perform live and close-up. I was giving them a few minutes that could stay in their minds for at least another twenty years before they decided to relate my tricks as their anecdote years in the future. I knew that magic is something inherently very impressive, but when I considered my attitude, I saw that it did not reflect that fact. Rather, I was concerned with being funny, and getting through a handful of tricks in a short space of time. Rather than focusing on the experiences of the few individuals for whom I was performing, I was thinking in terms of the room as a whole, and which tables were left to do.

I decided that my magic had to change. That I had to give serious thought to presentation. That, in fact, my presentation of the effects is where my impact as a magician lies - I realised that

it can turn a good effect into something artistic and stunning. I believe that the concentration on presentation is the most practical aspect of magic performance, presuming that one is working already with a set of decent effects.

Derren Brown

Pure Effect

2000

We end this section with ruminations from a seasoned teacher of magic, extolling the limits and virtues of having a mentor, and some insight into how this teacher—Mr. Jamy Ian Swiss—works with students on developing their magic.

LESSONS AND LEARNING

BY JAMY IAN SWISS

"HE WHO HEEDS THE VOICE OF HIS OWN HEART, RATHER THAN THE CRIES OF THE MARKETPLACE, WHO HAS THE COURAGE TO TEACH AND PROPAGATE WHAT HIS OWN HEART HAD TAUGHT HIM, WILL ALWAYS BE ORIGINAL. HONESTY IS THE SOURCE OF GENIUS, AND MAN WOULD BE MORE INVENTIVE IF HE WERE MORE MORAL."

-LUDWIG BORNE

A man takes an extended trip to visit China for the first time. After his first two weeks, he thinks to himself, "This is quite wonderful. I could write a book!" After three months, he thinks, "This is really so interesting. I could write, well, part of a book." After a year, he thinks, "I can't write anything— there's too much!"

When I was about fourteen or fifteen, I taught several people how to swim. My first student was a boy of about ten or eleven who, while otherwise athletic, was deathly afraid of the water. This caused him a great deal of discomfort and social unease

during the summer months. Being an accomplished swimmer and scuba diver, I offered to teach him. Although I had loved swimming for as long as I could remember, I intuitively grasped that what my young friend needed was not a methodical, information-laden regimen, but rather a simple, direct, no-frills approach that would not intimidate him. And so I spent a good chunk of the initial lesson getting him to forget his fear and simply dunk his head under the water, demonstrating to him that, not only was he capable of doing this, but that he could repeat the process without drowning. (This idea had been used on me by a camp counselor when I was about five and still afraid of getting my face wet. I recall that we repeatedly played Ring-Around-the-Rosie in the pool, dunking beneath the surface while holding hands on the final "All fall down!" I spared my adolescent friend the singing and choreography.) Having established that much, the rest was easy. I taught him to float via the traditional "dead man's float," which requires relaxation above all. In the next lesson he held onto the edge of the pool and scissor-kicked his feet. In the same lesson we added breathing, in the manner in which crawl stroke breathing is done. And in the third lesson we added the actual stroke; i.e., the arms. It had taken less than a week, and he was a swimmer. The next week he was diving off the side of the pool, and not long after that the diving board. It was amazing, and wonderful; it was logical, and simple. Not exactly easy, although it may have seemed so. But simple, indeed. And this approach continued to work effectively for every student thereafter.

In my early twenties, I tried to teach magic a couple of times. I thought back to my experience of teaching swimming and gained confidence from it. After all, I knew so much more about magic than I had ever known about swimming. I spent time researching in my library and putting together material,

planning a syllabus that I hoped would serve me for many students to come.

My failure was a complete one.

I couldn't quite discern the reason, but I had to be honest: My approach was not working. It seemed I was making the very mistake I had consciously set out to avoid in my swimming instruction: I was overloading my students with information that was not merely intimidating, but was distracting as well. It was preventing them from getting to the real heart of the matter; the most important issues and skills.

But what were those?

I didn't know. And try as I might, I could not make my way through the fog of information that filled my head, to reach those important and fundamental principles. I could not get out from under that cloud of accumulated knowledge and expertise to make the choices that were necessary before I could hope to begin to teach someone about magic.

I knew there was a problem. To some extent, I could identify its specifics. I didn't have a clue as to a solution. And so I gave up any further thoughts of teaching. Well, actually, I continued to think about it from time to time. But I refused to try and teach again, for a long while.

Until, as happened often to me between 1980 and 1985, I came upon a few words of Eugene Burgers that transformed my thinking. For the life of me I have never been able to locate the exact passage again—and neither has Eugene—so perhaps I imagined the whole thing. But something he wrote led me to

the sudden realization that no two students can be taught in exactly the same way.

Of course! Every student is different! I had tried to standardize a format, a curriculum, a syllabus that would serve every student. But magic is ever so complex and subtle and varied. No two students would excel or falter, be enticed or repelled, in precisely the same manner. Indeed, magic was not swimming! To get someone to overcome a single irrational fear, and then to learn a few simple mechanical skills, could indeed be taught quickly in a set pattern. But a course of instruction in magic would need to be ever so much more—fluid.

Since that time I have had a wide variety of students—beginners and professionals, short and long term—most quite wonderful. I have not merely been lucky—that is part of it—but I have been demanding of potential candidates. I teach primarily that I might learn, and for the pleasure that comes of that learning. And hence I must choose those who can teach me something—and I have not been disappointed. Some have traveled long distances to study—cross country and even trans-Atlantic; many have become intimate, important friends; most have become effective, original performers of magic.

One of the most important guiding principles behind my approach to teaching is the subject of goals. It's hard to achieve anything in life without defining one's goals. Goals need to be flexible, subject to review and revision, but in traveling pathways where the road markers may be few and far between, a goal, like the navigator's North Star, can provide a consistent reference point. Hobbyists may be interested in magic for many reasons: collecting books, collecting tricks, collecting moves, collecting methods. Occasionally, the somewhat passive activity of collecting is avoided in place of the more active pursuit of invention and creation, perhaps of tricks, moves, or methods. I

have pursued some of these aspects of magic myself from time to time. But above all, I am interested in performance, and it is my personal belief—my prejudice, if you will—that this is the highest calling any self-styled magician can pursue. That may seem unfair; I do not mean it to be, in the case of those who consider themselves clearly to be primarily historians, chroniclers, inventors, or collectors. I have enormous respect and regard for all such serious experts. But I am often disturbed by the fact that so many hobbyists seem to me to be perpetually confused about these matters. I encounter many who claim to be magicians but, without any actual specialty, are actually merely magic fans. Now I hasten to point out that there is nothing in the slightest wrong with being a fan. I am and have been a fan with regard to many areas of human endeavor. But what troubles me is the confusion that so often seems to prevail. If you have a drawer full of the latest pocket and packet tricks at home, that does not mean that what you do has much to do with what I do. It does not mean that our goals and concerns are at all similar. In the abstract this would seem to be self-evident. In practice it seems to be incomprehensible to so many hobbyists. Especially the ones who, even as the audience is in the midst of their final applause, and you are stepping out of the spotlight, bathed in sweat, are asking you if that handling of Card Warp is your own...

It may appear that I have digressed, but in fact, that kind of confusion is precisely what I hope my students will avoid, which is one reason I restrict their exposure to other magic hobbyists and shops as much as possible. I hope to teach the Top Change or palming while these things can still seem relatively easy—without the risk of contamination by the fears and prejudices and bad habits of others. But above all, my goal for my students, and hence my students' goal, must be to become performers of magic. All those other pursuits I mentioned previously are perfectly acceptable forms of human behavior—only not for my

students. If you wish to collect videotapes or packet tricks or any other such ephemera, feel free; but not on my time. Not even if you pay me; you couldn't pay me enough.

And so, when a prospective student comes my way, we spend some time talking about these goals. If the student has limited exposure to contemporary conjuring performance, I may perform a sampling of magic in different styles and of different types. I may show a variety of magic on videotape—performance only, without explanation — by performers with striking and widely divergent styles. What I want to get out of this meeting is a sense of the student's innate tastes, exclusive of my influence. Is he captivated by effects with a mental flavor? Does she respond more to dramatic or comedic work? Do feats of skill garner an especially strong response? I know that it won't be long before, whether I like it or not, I risk imprinting my style of magic on the student as a standard. In an attempt to minimize such a skewed perspective, I wish to demonstrate immediately that magic can be effectively performed in a variety of styles other than my own. I want my student to have perspective, and the opportunity to become their own person-as-magician, just as they have already become their own self.

Most of my students have some background and experience with magic, varying from a handful of years to a lifetime. Although I have accepted a few beginners, I take particular pleasure in working with students who have some degree of experience. In general, the more years they have spent in magic, the less productive they have been. They rarely, if ever, can perform much of anything. If they can, they have never written a script. If they have, it probably wasn't original. In short, they have been raised by magic shops and magic clubs. They are in for a surprise. They are about to find out what they have never done. But the good news—the great news—is that they are also about to find out what and how much they know, but didn't know

they knew. You see, the wonderful thing about these students is that every time they hung around the magic shop or club, or bought yet another trick that they would try a few times and then dump into the drawer, they actually did learn something. They probably haven't been able to make much use of it, but they have gained some knowledge. Well, perhaps that is too generous a use of the word "knowledge," but they have continually added to a random hodgepodge of accumulated facts without an accompanying theoretical base. That theoretical framework, with the emphasis on performance, is precisely what they are going to get from me. And that will give them useful access to a wealth of previously useless, yet accumulated, knowledge.

And so, in the case of these students, I take a cue from Eugene Burger's book, *Secrets and Mysteries*. I ask that, after purchasing a notebook (or a computer) in which they will be recording ideas, scripts, and other notes, the first thing they do is prepare three lists, with a spare copy for me. The first list consists of that trick or those tricks that the person can actually and completely, right at that moment, perform for someone other than themselves. The trick or tricks that, if presented with the opportunity to perform, they actually use at this time. It's usually a pretty small list. And, as you might guess, it's going to get smaller before it gets bigger.

The second list is of those tricks that the student is reasonably familiar with, but is not really ready to perform. Perhaps he has spent a fair amount of time with a trick, but never gotten around to performing it. Perhaps he performed it at one time, but has not kept it fresh in his repertoire. Whatever the case, it is a trick that the student knows reasonably well and understands, but

does not feel ready to perform. This list is usually larger than the first.

The third list is in essence a “wish list,” a list of those tricks that the student merely likes, and has perhaps thought at one time or another that he would like to do, but has never made the attempt. Perhaps he felt these tricks to be too demanding or difficult or time consuming; perhaps he merely never got around to them; or perhaps there’s simply a trick he never dreamed of attempting, but that he has enjoyed seeing. This third list can often be a more accurate barometer of the student’s tastes than the other two might be.

If nothing else, I have forced the student to make the attempt to think clearly about his magic, a concept that may indeed be new to him. But at least he has a notebook now, and he has written in it. It is a start.

At the first lesson, the student is required to perform as much of the first list for me as time will allow, just as if he were performing it for someone else; i.e., a “real person.” I do not offer much comment here; I just want to see it all. This is an experience that can sometimes turn the students world upside-down — and he may require a cup of strong tea or some such character bolsterer before the session is out. Besides, the student is utterly terrified. But he may as well get accustomed to the idea of performing for me, because he’s going to be doing a lot of that as time goes on.

Because, from beginning to end, this process will be about the student’s development as a performer.

In case there is any confusion, let me attempt to clarify this concept of “performer” a bit further.

A performer is one who can perform magic effectively. Not someone who can talk about it, describe it, think about it, or who confuses performance with demonstration. Demonstrating this week’s latest over-the-counter novelty for the wife and kids is not performance. *It’s not even close.*

Rather, a performer is someone who, having chosen his given magic trick carefully, has mastered every aspect of it. He has dissected and analyzed and considered the effect and the method and the presentation, and has invested whatever time necessary to achieve full mastery of all these and other aspects of his trick. He has achieved perfect command of and proficiency in the technical requirements of handling the props and executing the sleights. He has chosen sleights that are of high standard and has achieved nothing less than perfect and professional mastery of them. Then he has given great thought and effort and time to creating and writing and editing and honing and polishing and rewriting and polishing again an original script. He has practiced the moves, learned the lines, and rehearsed the performance. And finally, when ready, and not a moment sooner—in the case of my students, when I judge him capable—he has begun the real work of performing this trick for people other than members of his household, and in doing so has continued to revamp and update and refine the technical and presentational aspects of his performance, based on the feedback and response of his audiences, until, at last, he has achieved a presentation worthy of professional performance. That he may have no intention of ever performing professionally is quite beside the point—*because money has nothing to do with the pursuit of excellence.* (If you cannot provide your own plethora of examples from life in evidence of this premise, then I fear my doing so would serve

little useful purpose. I mean, really—just turn on the television for a moment....)

Now, what about “collecting” a repertoire of such performance pieces? Well, one only requires—especially as an amateur—a handful of such routines to achieve an effective and complete performance. In many cases, one trick will suffice, and in most, three or four will certainly establish the sense that the audience has been privy to a complete program or, if you will, show. For the goal is simply this: That at the completion of such a show, the audience regard the performer as just that—a performer, in every sense of the word. That they regard him simply as a magician, without caveat, excuse, or apology. Simply: a magician. Better yet, perhaps the greatest magician they have ever seen or could imagine seeing. (Note that Robert-Houdin said that a magician is an actor playing the part of a great magician!) That’s right; a performance of (perhaps unexpectedly) professional caliber, and nothing less. That is the goal. And this goal will not be achieved by a huge repertoire of half-assed, incompetent, slovenly executed, over-the-counter, trash tricks. Rather, it requires very few tricks indeed. And so the “collecting” aspect is, in the end, up to the student. After the first three or four tricks, I don’t care what he does concerning repertoire. It is entirely his choice; a function of time and a reflection of his level of interest. In other words, it has, at that point, very little to do with me or anything I can control. If these goals—including the pursuit of excellence—are not congruent with the potential student’s nature, then perhaps he would be better served by going to the magic store and purchasing some novelty. Then again, both he and the art of magic would probably be better served by his pursuit of some less demanding activity—although I cannot at the moment think of any field of human endeavor that cannot

be well served by personal integrity, high standards, and the pursuit of excellence. Can you?

“At any given moment, you can learn.”

—Pablo Casals (at age ninety-two)

Jamy Ian Swiss
Shattering Illusions
1994

PARTTEN



ORIGINALITY

"THE IMAGINATION IS A NECESSARY
INGREDIENT OF PERCEPTION ITSELF."

-IMMANUEL KANT

One of the greatest obstacles we face as magicians is time; there is just never enough. For many, magic is but just one variable in a complex life equation. How much time should we expect to spend on magic? And more importantly, how should we spend that time? Eugene Burger offers a daily plan for those beginning in magic, and then warns us of the deadliest waste of time: the tyranny of the “new.”

THE TYRANNY OF THE NEW

BY EUGENE BURGER

"HOW HARD I FIND IT TO SEE WHAT IS RIGHT IN FRONT
OF MY EYES!"

-WITTGENSTEIN

Since people very often ask me questions, let me turn the tables for a moment and ask a few questions of you. First and foremost, do you really want to become a better magical performer? Do you want your audiences to be more impressed with your magic and with you as a performer of magic? Do you want them to tell you that you're the very best magician they have ever seen? (If they say this, of course, please don't believe it! They have probably never before experienced another magician live and in person and, besides, from time to time all close-up magicians are told this!)

Let's assume that you have answered these questions in the affirmative, becoming more insistent with each answer. It is, of course, very easy to say yes to questions such as these. Words come easily to most of us.

Well, it isn't easy. Allow me to tell you this at the beginning because this realization is the real beginning - for it is a reaching out toward growth in magic and toward actualization of our potentialities as performers. The beginning is always the realization that we want to become better performers, that we want to learn our art.

Here, however, it begins to get "sticky." For myself, even though I have accepted payment as a teacher of magic, and I do believe that magic can be learned, I don't really think that it can always be taught. It can be learned because every great magician in history has learned it. It can't always be taught because some people simply cannot learn it; they cannot learn to be great or sometimes even good performers. Whether we are here talking about DNA and genetics or about patterns of human socialization or a combination of the two or some third category we haven't yet thought up, the bottom line seems to me to be that some individuals are natural performers and other people aren't. You might give these latter souls all the magic lessons in the world from the most brilliant teachers, but the fact remains that, while they might very definitely improve as performers, they will never become members of the World's-Greatest-Magician club.

Improvement, however, is growth; it is realizing aspects of our vast potentiality. Unless we have closed ourselves off from real criticism, growth is possible for all of us. Through work and rehearsal, we can become more relaxed during a performance, we can become more confident and powerful — for these things are the result of knowing what we are doing, which is to say, they are the result of thoughtful repetition, of practice and rehearsal. As we read in the Tao Te Ching, even failure is an opportunity. If you blame someone else, there is no end to the blame" (Ch.79).

†The real heart of the matter is actually beginning; beginning in fact and not simply in our heads. The first step is always the most difficult — not only for you but for each of us! But, again, as Lao Tzu also wrote: a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

If you are serious about this, one of the first issues that you must consider is what I shall call “re-cutting the pie.” Each of us, indeed, has the same 24-hour-a-day pie and each of us already cuts that pie into pieces.

If magic is one’s avocation, then one has other employment and that takes up so many hours each day. The pie is beginning to cut itself! Your family brings with it its own commitment and time responsibility. Another piece of the pie has been cut. Each of us, in fact, already is cutting up our 24-hour-a-day pie. The only questions are whether you’re doing it consciously or not — and how large a slice you are going to give to your magic. If you want growth in magic, you probably must re-cut the pie giving your magic a larger slice.

How much time shall you give to your magic. What shall your answer be? Needless to say, I have no interest whatever in legislating for you. You will need to decide for yourself.

Obviously, one must consider time not simply as quantity (duration of moments ticking away on a clock) but also as “quality time” as opposed to “non-quality time.” Simply put, quality time would be to spend 15 minutes each day in thoughtful and directed practice and rehearsal of your magic. In time, this activity will help you become a better performer. Non-quality time, on the other hand, would be to spend an hour a day thumbing through books and magic magazines and daydreaming about your magic. This activity often produces nothing of enduring value. (Yes, I realize that those years of

daydreaming might one day produce something truly fabulous; then again, they might not....)

I maintain that regular practice and rehearsal is better for me than sporadic practice and rehearsal. To work consciously toward a goal every day seems better than working on it only when I happen to remember and think about it. I maintain, further, that directed practice and rehearsal is better than undirected — that is, before I begin a practice or rehearsal session, I want consciously to know what it is that I intend to practice or rehearse — and then this is the material that I do actually work on. I don't drift off and go over to the book shelf where I can page through books and delude myself into thinking that I am making progress in the craft of magic! No, instead, I work on what I have planned. I give it my attention. I think about what I am doing.

If I am trying to hurry, of course, I can easily ruin everything. Craft and art do not grow very well with that state of mind we call "being in a hurry." If I say to myself that I am in a hurry, that I must rush this, that I need to be able to perform this effect yesterday, I have already divided my mind and my attention, and introduced a cloud which will hover over and probably spoil my practice and rehearsal time.

"I simply must have this magic trick for the show/magic club meeting tomorrow night!"

How often we have heard this. How often we have said it ourselves. Don't you see that this is the statement that is destroying magic both as an art and as a craft? More than that, to the extent that this is the way you relate to your own work in magic, and you are the one who is "trying to get this magic trick ready for...tonight!" — then you are already working against your own improvement as a magical performer.

Do you see this, do you see it in your own life, or do you simply see the words about it? To see only the words, and to understand the words, is very easy. It is easy because understanding only the words does not challenge us to change anything about how we are working with our magic. We can remain the same, in the same old ruts, but — in our heads — we think that we know what to do. We have it all figured out in our heads. It is crystal clear in our heads. It's just that spectators always seem to catch us when we try to palm that card....

Will you, then, become serious about your own work in magic? Will you make a renewed commitment to improve the quality of your practice and rehearsal? Will you make a commitment that you will never perform a magic effect unless you are ready, really ready — that you will not allow your work in magic to be rushed by imaginary schedules, such as tonight's magic club meeting? The hurried mind is embattled with demons of its own devising.

In my own experience, one of the greatest obstacles to regular and directed practice and rehearsal is what I shall call the tyranny of the new. We are always looking over our shoulders for what might be new. We are always looking for something else, something different from what we already have. We divide our minds between what we are practicing or rehearsing, and what might lie beyond the next hill, a new trick that might take less work and fool more people.

Can we, then, bring our attention back to what is happening now...in practice? Shall I always allow my mind to split apart, dreaming its dreams which lose the importance of this moment, the now, the inner meaning of practice and rehearsal?

The pie, of course, must be cut; there are only 24 hours in a day. If I do not use the time I have allocated for real practice and

rehearsal, I am using it for — what? Most likely, the allocated time is completely consumed in this never-ending search for the new, then the newer, and then the newest. This quest is, in fact, never ending — it is “climbing the greased pole.” Shall I learn every new trick that appears in print? Shall I even read every new trick that appears in print? If I do, what time is there remaining for the real work? The work of practice and rehearsal? Taking this a step further, if I do read every trick that appears in print, am I thereby increasing my knowledge as a magician? On one level, of course I am. On another level, the more basic realization that a magician is one who is able to perform magic, it might very well be that the knowledge I am gaining is only in the head, and superficial compared with the knowledge that actually allows me to perform even one effect of magic. Knowing about magic, after all, is not the same as knowing directly how to perform magic. I know about hundreds and hundreds of magic tricks; my repertoire of actual performance material numbers less than fifty routines.

My point here is exceedingly simple: without a commitment to regular and directed practice and rehearsal, a real commitment, I am cast adrift. I wander around in magic without anchoring my work to practice, to learning to perform that one, single magic trick — and then two magic effects, and then three, and then...a repertoire. Most likely, without this commitment, I will forever be chasing the chimera of the new, always seeking one more new magic trick to stimulate me, yet sadly never really learning to perform any of them.

Am I saying, then, that one shouldn't read books and magazines? Is it bad to want to find out what is new in magic?

Quite obviously. I am not — and it isn't. We grow, in part, through learning and studying and being curious about what is new. My point, rather, is that if this sort of activity defines

my involvement with magic, then that involvement is rather superficial indeed. Where is the depth? The commitment?

If I am primarily looking for the new, there will be little time to actually learn that one, single magic trick or to develop my abilities as a performer of magic. Always to be seeking the new, to the detriment of working on my would-be repertoire now, from my point of view, is to be chasing a phantasm and an illusion. Such a pursuit of a craft or art is surely possible. When we look at the indoctrination rituals of magic clubs, whereby new members are systematically taught that magic is indeed the trivial enterprise of having something new to show for each meeting, such a false pursuit may even seem likely. There is no real push, no challenge, to rise above the crowd. And the art of magic spirals downward, into its own oblivion!

There is, of course, another path — a path cluttered with its own obstacles and dangers! This is the path wherein one consciously, intentionally, seeks to build a repertoire...slowly, one effect at a time. This path requires concentrated attention and dedicated effort if one is to travel to the end of it. While traveling on this path, one will certainly be interested in learning what is new — but not at the expense of one's goal, one's practice and rehearsal, one's actual work in the art of magic.

Realizing all this, we have come full circle. And so I conclude where I began, by asking you a question. Do you really want to become a better magical performer?

Eugene Burger
The Experience of Magic
1989

The passing down of wisdom from teacher to student is usually a private affair, guarded by the teacher and coveted by the student. We can only imagine the legendary exchanges throughout magic history, and what the greatest masters of one generation had to say to the next.

In this extraordinary exchange, we become flies on a digital wall, witnesses to a profound correspondence between a young Brian Brushwood, seeking advice from his hero, Teller. In desperation, Brian reaches out to Teller for advice on finding his own persona.

In a profound act of generosity, Teller responds to Brian in earnest, with an equal measure of style, encouragement, and advice. What was presumably a forty-five minute donation of time for Teller is, for Brian, for me, and generations to come, one of the most compelling letters in modern magic.

BRUSHWOOD/TELLER CORRESPONDENCE

BRIAN BRUSHWOOD AND TELLER

Brian Brushwood writes:

Tuesday, Oct 17, 1995

All right. I have put it off long enough. I told myself I would wait to write you until I had something meaningful to say, but I have been sitting on your address (figuratively) for months now, and am fed up with waiting. The fact is, Teller, I am furious at you. Not for offending anyone, for being outrageous, or for being so inventive with your magic, but because you were there first. In *Genii* magazine, you make a brilliant point of explaining that regardless of the true origin of a trick, whoever is most famous performing it OWNS it (I believe you cited your new “ownership” of the bullet catch). Unfortunately, I don’t believe you extended this idea far enough. This concept reaches all the way into the very attitudes and styles of performance. In short, because of Penn and Teller, I cannot be angry at magic, at least not on stage.

It seems to me, that just as you own the Bullet Catch, so do you own the ability to lash out at magic, to act as a vent for your audience’s frustrations with the cruise-ship trickymen. Not to mention the use of blood and/or violence in a humorous way. Hell! You might even own the two-male duo! All this ownership

has kept me from doing the kind of stage (and close-up, believe it or not) magic I want, for fear of being branded a copycat.

This summer, I attempted to tackle this problem by writing a couple of two-male duo acts, trying my damndest to keep the P&T out of my veins; it met with some success. One act, consisting of two comedy magic character pieces (a drill instructor who performs the “coloring book,” a gibberish-speaking samurai who performs a card-trick that ends in Hara-kiri) won the Texas Association of Magicians Senior Comedy competition. However, I find it difficult to follow your advice of “letting hate, not love, be your driving force” (which is absolutely true) and at the same time keep from becoming a P&T wannabe.

If you could offer any advice on how you established your own character and style, I would greatly appreciate it.

Brian Allen Brushwood

A day later, Teller responded.

Wed, October, 18, 1995

My dear bastard son,

It is about time you wrote, my boy. Now, calm down. Remind yourself of a few things. I am 47. I have been earning my living in show business for twenty years. I have been doing magic since I was five, which makes it 42 years. And I had the good fortune to (a) meet Penn and (b) become an off-Broadway hit at the exact right moment in time.

When we started we HAD no style, no understanding of ourselves or what we were doing. We had feelings, vague ones, a sense of what we liked, maybe, but no unified point of view, not even a real way to express our partnership. We fought constantly and expected to break up every other week. But we did have a few things, things I think you might profit from knowing:

We loved what we did. More than anything. More than sex. Absolutely.

We always felt as if every show was the most important thing in the world, but knew if we bombed, we'd live.

We did not start as friends, but as people who respected and admired each other. Crucial, absolutely crucial for a partnership. As soon as we could afford it, we ceased sharing lodgings. Equally crucial.

We made a solemn vow not to take any job outside of show business. We borrowed money from parents and friends, rather than take that lethal job waiting tables. This forced us to take any job offered to us. Anything. We once did a show in the middle of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia as part of a fashion show on a hot July night while all around our stage, a race-riot was fully underway. That's how serious we were about our vow.

Get on stage. A lot. Try stuff. Make your best stab and keep stabbing. If it's there in your heart, it will eventually find its way out. Or you will give up and have a prudent, contented life doing something else.

Penn sees things differently from the way I do. But I really feel as if the things we create together are not things we devised, but things we discovered, as if, in some sense, they were always

there in us, waiting to be revealed, like the figure of Mercury waiting in a rough lump of marble.

Have heroes outside of magic. Mine are Hitchcock, Poe, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Bach. You're welcome to borrow them, but you must learn to love them yourself for your own reasons. Then they'll push you in the right direction.

Here's a compositional secret. It's so obvious and simple, you'll say to yourself, "This man is bullshitting me." I am not. This is one of the most fundamental things in all theatrical movie composition and yet magicians know nothing of it. Ready?

Surprise me. That's it. Place 2 and 2 right in front of my nose, but make me think I'm seeing 5. Then reveal the truth, 4!, and surprise me.

Now, don't underestimate me, like the rest of the magicians of the world. Don't fool yourself into thinking that I've never seen a set of linking rings before and I'll be oh-so-stunned because you can "link" them. Bullshit.

Here's how surprise works. While holding my attention, you withhold basic plot information. Feed it to me little by little. Make me try and figure out what's going on. Tease me in one direction. Throw in a false ending. Then turn it around and flip me over.

I do the old Needle trick. I get a guy up on stage, who examines the needles. I swallow them. He searches my mouth. They're gone. I dismiss him and he leaves the stage. The audience thinks the trick is over. Then I take out the thread. "Haha! Floss!" they exclaim. I eat the floss. Then the wise ones start saying, "Not floss, thread. Thread. Needles. Needles and thread. Ohmygod he's going to thread the need..." And by that time they're out and sparkling in the sunshine.

Read Roald Dahl. Watch the old Alfred Hitchcock episodes. Surprise. Withhold information. Make them say, "What the hell's he up to? Where's this going to go?" and don't give them a clue where it's going. And when it finally gets there, let it land. An ending.

It took me eight years (are you listening?) EIGHT YEARS to come up with a way of delivering the Miser's Dream that had surprises and an ENDING.

Love something besides magic, in the arts. Get inspired by a particular poet, film-maker, sculptor, composer. You will never be the first Brian Allen Brushwood of magic if you want to be Penn & Teller. But if you want to be, say, the Salvador Dali of magic, well, THERE'S an opening.

I should be a film editor. I'm a magician. And if I'm good, it's because I should be a film editor. Bach should have written opera or plays. But instead, he worked in eighteenth-century counterpoint. That's why his counterpoints have so much more point than other contrapuntalists. They have passion and plot. Shakespeare, on the other hand, should have been a musician, writing counterpoint. That's why his plays stand out from the others through their plot and music.

I'm tired now. I've been writing to you, my dear bastard son, for 45 minutes merely because, tonight, I'm remembering that evening I first met your mother in Rio, during Carnival...ah!... and how we loved!

Paternally,

Teller
1995

In the next essay, Whit Haydn writes, "I prefer to see classic or familiar magic done well, than original magic that fails to fool or to entertain." I heartily agree. Whit brings up the all-important lesson that we must learn from those magicians and tricks that bring with them age and experience. If we take our magic off the beaten path, we must know why.

Whit also says, "There is nothing wrong with a magic act that lacks originality but is professionally and competently done." I disagree. Whit believes (and he is probably right) that there is a place in entertainment for the vanilla magician who does standard effects in a standard way. They are, as he puts it, the cover bands of magic.

I optimistically, naively believe that every magician has the ability to do more, and that those who do not value originality or creativity choose not to do so. I would argue further that armies of magicians who perform the same tired tricks in the same tired way are as harmful to magic as those who perform bad, original magic.

But as I have mentioned before, the point of this collection is not that you or I agree with each other or with each essayist; the point is to present well-reasoned arguments from seasoned magicians (like Whit Haydn). What you believe is up to you.

AGAINST ORIGINALITY IN MAGIC

BY WHIT HAYDN

In magic convention contests and in the meetings at local rings, much is made of the importance of originality. It seems to me that this concern is sometimes misdirected, and most certainly so when it comes to young or beginning magicians.

It is essential that those who want to learn magic start by copying or imitating others. There is nothing wrong with this—provided of course, that the effects and routines being copied have been published by the originators. In fact, I don't believe one can learn to be a good magician except by imitation.

A beginning guitar player isn't told to make up original songs. He first learns to play other people's work. Neither should a beginning magician be asked to do original tricks.

The way that patter goes with the presentation of the trick, the feel for routining, the subtleties of misdirection—these are all learned best by the student taking a great routine and learning to do it the way it was created by a competent working performer. I have too often seen magic students learn a classic routine and then immediately begin to muck around with it for the sake of "originality."

Often, one doesn't understand the subtleties of a routine until he or she has performed it many times in front of people. It is only from faithfully reproducing the routine in front of an audience that one begins to see why certain moves or patter lines are structured or placed the way the originator had them. Without spending time performing the routine the way it was created, the student abandons all the experience, knowledge, and thought that went into its creation.

Routines should not be changed for the sake of being "original." Originality should come in when there is some need—when the routine as written doesn't suit the personality of the performer, his performing situations, or has some inconsistency or fault that the performer finds and corrects. This should come after the routine has been explored in front of an audience many times.

All the great magicians had to learn their craft somewhere. They all began by copying the work of those that they admired.

In Zen brush painting, the student would apprentice with a master for eight years. Each morning the master would let the students watch him create a few paintings, and for the rest of the day, the students would try to exactly copy those paintings with as much speed and accuracy as possible. In the evening, the teacher would look over their work and give them suggestions for improvement in their technique.

Students were not encouraged or allowed to be "original." At the end of the eight years, the students were sent out into the world. At this point they would have absorbed the point of view, values, and tastes of the instructor. They would have an appreciation and understanding of their art.

The idea was that if they could capture whatever image the master showed them perfectly, then they could capture any

original image that came into their heads. If they were not original thinkers, then they would always be good copyists and could make a living at that. If they had original ideas, then they would have the skill to realize them.

In magic, I have often seen very clever and original material that suffered from a lack of knowledge of the basics of the craft. I prefer to see classic or familiar magic done well, than original magic that fails to fool or to entertain. Much can be gained from reading the philosophy of magic in books such as Maskelyne and Devant's *Our Magic* (my favorite magic book), but it is only in the experience of performing that these lessons really begin to make sense and can be applied.

There is nothing wrong with a magic act that lacks originality but is professionally and competently done. In music, this would be the equivalent of the cover bands that play for weddings and similar events. These groups are respectable and serve a need. The lack of originality will keep them from going beyond these sorts of venues, but within this area, they are perfectly fine.

Many magicians would fall under a similar category. Not everyone has the skill, originality, and dedication of a Lance Burton, but magic that is well executed, and performed entertainingly is always going to be well received. As the magician grows in his understanding of the art, his need for originality will grow as well.

I would like to see magic organizations encourage young magicians to learn the classics. Too often, the need for the hobbyist to see something new and different regardless of its quality overtakes the need for entertaining, well-executed magic. The great street magician Jim Cellini hosted a famous get-together of close-up performers in Greensboro, NC a few

years back. Slydini, Frank Garcia, Bob Sheets, Karl Norman and many other top performers attended.

The performers concentrated on their most commercial magic, without regard to repetition. We saw many different variations of the card on ceiling, the cups and balls, and other classic effects. It was an incredible experience. Watching fine performers do their own versions of the same routines provided a hugely rewarding lesson in the art of magic, and a resource for future ideas.

The contests for young magicians might best be structured around classics like the linking rings, cups and balls, etc. Within the context of a cups and balls contest, for example, a premium should be placed on skill, technique, and entertainment value. Originality should be relegated to its rightful place—as an important but not necessarily the most important criteria.

Whit Haydn
Chicago Surprise
1999

WHIT HAYDN

Whit “Pop” Haydn has won numerous awards from the Academy of Magical Arts, including Stage *and* Close-up Magician of the Year.



Magicians are always in search of shortcuts and holy grails. They look for easier ways to do things, faster ways of performing, and cheaper ways to buy magic. And in the back of their minds, they always believe that the perfect magic trick is the one they are about to buy. This seems like a harmless eccentricity, but it can (and often does) become the very weakness that holds you back.

In my favorite passage of the essay, Darwin offers advice that is good generally, and particularly appropriate given the spirit of Magic in Mind: "...accept the fact that no book can change your life or even make you a better magician. Only you can do that through hard work. The best book can only provide some tools and some direction."

NEXT BOOK SYNDROME

BY DARWIN ORTIZ

“As a rule the purchase of books is mistaken for the appropriation of their contents.”

—Arthur Schopenhauer

“The desires of men are insatiable. Their nature urges them to desire all things, but fate permits them to enjoy but a few things.”

—Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

THE ADDICTION

I used to have a friend who had made millions in direct marketing. Those familiar with the field will know that working off the right mailing list is more than half the battle. He told me that the biggest moneymaker he ever had was a weight-loss product he pitched through the mails. Not surprisingly, he worked from lists of people who had previously bought weight-loss products. The grim reality was that they were probably still overweight and looking for another solution to their problem.

He told me that the most productive mailing list he ever worked off was a list of people who had ordered another weight-loss

product *within the last week*. This meant, of course, that the person hadn't had time to give the first product a fair trial. Yet, they were already ordering something else to accomplish the same thing.

One can picture them opening the first product and discovering that, instead of offering a magic solution, it required diet and exercise. So they immediately tossed it aside and ordered the next product that they hoped would provide a miracle with no effort on their part. No doubt, they would then sit by the mailbox in breathless anticipation of how the new miracle product would transform their bodies.

I suspect that many magicians can identify with that anticipation, having sat by their mailbox often enough awaiting the next great magic book that would transform them into great magicians. They could probably also identify with the disappointment of having to face reality once the book arrived.

Yet, like our overweight friends, this disappointment doesn't dissuade them from believing that the NEXT book will be better. Indeed, the next book *will* always be better for one simple reason. It doesn't exist for them yet. No magic book that exists can ever measure up to a magic book that doesn't exist. Because as long as it doesn't exist, each magician can project his own fantasies and unrealistic expectations onto it.

CRASHING

It's only when the book arrives that the magician must face the fact that, no matter how great it is, *it's only a book*. It's only a finite collection of specific effects, moves, or insights. To benefit from it, you have to read it, study it, and think about what you've read. Finally, you have to put in the effort to transform what's

on the page into something you can effectively do for people. To bring the book to life you have to *work*.

Ironically, the better the book, the more work it will probably demand of the reader. Therefore, the less likely it is to be appreciated by the average magician. Even if you do put in the work, the book will only help you become a better magician. It won't transform your life. *It's only a book.*

When the average magician realizes this, disappointment inevitably sets in. This disappointment is usually expressed as, "I really thought the book would be better than this." The feeling being expressed, however, is, "Gee, my life is no different than it was the day before the book arrived." A recent magic board post expressing this sort of disappointment with some long-awaited book ended with the poignant comment, "I don't know what I was expecting." Am I the only one who detects a sad, lost tone to this statement?

Not long ago, magicians were awaiting the publication of Juan Tamariz's *Mnemonic* with the same desperation that tsunami survivors await the arrival of emergency aid. Then one of the inevitable publishing delays was announced on a message board. Someone responded wittily, "Oh no! Now I'm going to have to read one of the magic books I already own!"

This joke contains a profound truth. The continual hysteria of anticipation for the NEXT magic book is, in fact, a way to avoid the hard work of studying the books you already own.

THE HIGH

It has become common for magicians to blame their disappointment with each eagerly awaited magic book in turn on the book having been "over-hyped." (I confess I'm not clear

on the distinction between hype and “over-hype.” Since hype is short for hyperbole, one would think that any exaggeration would merely constitute hype.)

It’s true that there are people in the magic business who are masters of using the Internet to whip magicians into hysterical anticipation over whatever they’re planning to market next. Their posts usually start with, “I’ve just had the good fortune to see an advance copy of John Doe’s ____.” (Translation: “My company will soon be marketing John Doe’s ____.”)

Nevertheless, I don’t believe that most of the blame for the periodic outbreaks of next-book hysteria among magicians falls on the shoulders of authors, publishers, or dealers. At the merest whisper of some new book in the works, magicians will take to the Internet to whip *each other* into a frenzy. It’s the magicians themselves who produce ridiculously unrealistic expectations in their own minds for each new book on the horizon.

I don’t think that hype is the right word for what is going on here. A producer promoting his product with exaggerated claims is hype. A group of people stroking each other into an orgiastic frenzy isn’t hype; it’s a circle jerk.

Magicians will talk about checking their mailbox each day in breathless anticipation of receiving the NEXT great magic book. I can sympathize. I recall doing the same thing as a child waiting for the arrival of the decoder ring I’d sent away for by using breakfast cereal box tops. In fact, magicians awaiting the next magic book or video set most closely resemble children awaiting the arrival of Santa Claus (except that they don’t show quite as much maturity).

Indeed, I think that the anticipation itself and the fantasizing they can indulge in while waiting for the NEXT book is precisely what

many magicians have become addicted to. The daydreaming of possibilities, the breathless expectation, the speculating with other magicians who are just as ignorant as they are about what the book may contain and when it will appear is the real high. The proof is that when there is no new book on the horizon, they begin experiencing withdrawal. They'll start their own rumors and desperately ask each other if they know of any books in the works. It's all a sad search for another high (as well as a search for an excuse not to read the books they already own.) There always needs to be something in the pipeline to fuel the pipe dreams.

THE CURE

I'm not naïve enough to think that my views are going to change the direction of magic. I am optimistic enough to think that there may be some magicians who are serious in their attitude toward magic but have gotten trapped in the herd mentality that has always existed in magic but that has grown exponentially with the advent of the Internet.

If you want to escape the emotional roller coaster of the next-great-book syndrome, here is a suggestion. *Don't buy a new magic book until you have finished reading the last one you bought.* (This is so commonsensical that I would feel silly typing it if I didn't know that most magicians don't do this.)

To follow this advice, you'll have to overcome the perpetual fear that you're missing out on something wonderful that all the other kids have. In fact, the next magic book you buy probably won't be any better than the one you're now having trouble finishing because you keep daydreaming about the miracles contained in the book you haven't bought yet. If you want to

progress in magic, stop agonizing over all the great books you don't own and focus on benefiting from the ones you do.

Another fear you'll have to overcome is that the NEXT book will go out of print tomorrow if you don't buy it today. Magic dealers and publishers encourage this largely unfounded fear for obvious reasons. You'll see Internet posts warning ominously that a book that came out a few weeks ago is already almost out of print. What they don't tell you is that the publisher is planning to reprint the moment it does.

Although popular magic books go out of print from time to time, publishers almost never let them stay out of print until the initial run of popularity is over, something that will normally take a year or two. Even then, these books will have sold so many copies that for an additional year or two they can easily be found on the secondary market for a modest price. There will always be plenty of "disappointed" buyers ready to unload it. (These observations apply only to books that are initially big sellers. But then books that receive the "NEXT great book" mantle always are.)

An advantage of the approach I recommend is that you'll usually be reading a book months after everyone else has abandoned it. You won't be able to join the "what are the five best tricks in *Mnemonic*?" crowd. You'll have no choice but to decide for yourself. You'll virtually always be out of step with everyone else in magic. And that's the best place to be if you want to make serious progress as a magician. Anything you can do to keep from being sucked into the hive mind that is the magic Internet is a step toward becoming a better magician.

On a related note, I've often heard magicians respond to a neophyte's request to recommend a good card book by saying, "Buy the first four volumes of *Card College*." I can't agree. I

would instead advise buying volume one only. After working your way through that, you probably won't need to be told to buy volume two.

All that buying all four volumes at once will accomplish is to virtually guarantee that you'll start reading volume two before you've finished volume one. You'll start reading volume three before you've finished volume two. And you'll start reading volume four before you've finished volume three. This, in turn, will almost guarantee that you'll never read any one of the four volumes from cover to cover.

This would be particularly unfortunate with a series so carefully planned out to be studied in a lesson-by-lesson sequence. Since there is little danger that these great books will ever become difficult to obtain in our lifetime, buying one volume at a time should work out fine.

To sum up, accept the fact that no book can change your life or even make you a better magician. Only you can do that through hard work. The best book can only provide some tools and some direction.

I'm going to have to go now. I've got a problem of my own to ponder. I bought a stairclimber and I'm quite disappointed with it. I've had it for a month and I'm still in no better shape than the day it arrived. I wonder if I should take it out of the box and assemble it.

Darwin Ortiz
MAGIC Magazine
March 2006

The majority of our discussion on originality has been cautionary—not to be original at the expense of being good, not spending our formative period trying to be too different, realizing that the next book isn't always the best.

But there is, as ever, another side. Nevil Maskelyne writes, “So long as an appreciable contingent of magical performers can remain content merely to buy, beg, borrow, or steal from others—to do nothing beyond that which others have done, to aim at nothing higher than a slavish imitation of original work...so long will magic remain condemned to unmerited disrepute.”

It's time to think about the benefits of doing magic in your own way—and the hazards of blindly following those who came before us.

PERSPECTIVE ON OUR PERSONAL PLANETS

BY JOHN CARNEY

Allow me to relate a revealing anecdote. A friend of mine recently attended a magic convention, bringing along a “layman” friend for the experience. After a frenzy of dealer shows, performances, exhibitions and socializing, they left this fairy-tale land, and re-entered the real world. The outsider pulled my friend aside and, in the most heartfelt tone, pleaded, “As a friend, I’m telling you, don’t spend any more time with these magicians. It’s not healthy. Leave these people now!”

This may sound a bit extreme, but it goes far to illustrate the blinders we place on ourselves when we enter the “world” of magic a world with more than its share of dilettantes who corrupt the cause of art from the inside.

In advancing the case of magic, few have been more instrumental than Robert-Houdin. In his day, most magicians still performed with long robes, gigantic sleeves and conical hats. Their tables were large enough to accommodate a hidden assistant, through which a great many trickeries were effected. Robert-Houdin took magic off the street and brought it into polite society. His

performing parlor was tasteful, and his props and tables were familiar looking and evoked no suspicion.

How ironic that the gentleman's tail coat, adopted by Robert-Houdin to match the ordinary evening dress of patrons of his day, is still clung to by magicians nearly a century after having passed out of fashion. Outside of weddings or an audience with royalty, the tail coat is considered as out of place as brown shoes with a tuxedo. Magicians embrace this garment for the extra pockets and hiding space it provides, with little thought for keeping pace with contemporary society. Few have the theatrical gift for developing a character or staging a "period piece" that would justify these antiquated elements.

In their inferior imitation of a dandy sophisticate, I have witnessed more than a few performers light candles in a candelabra, using disposable plastic lighters. They aspire to be Noel Coward, but are more likened to Chaplin's tramp, pathetically trying to keep up appearances.

Affectation has found root in magical paraphernalia as well. If we study the props illustrated in the older books on magic, we must concede that a mutation of original design has taken place, to accommodate the merchandising of magic, and this practice has subsequently destroyed the outward innocence of the props intended by their inventors.

Take, for example, the popular dove pan. Originally it was designed to resemble a cooking pan with its customary handle. Ingredients were placed into it and it was covered, to smother a flame or further the cooking. When the cover was lifted, birds or other livestock had magically taken the place of the foodstuffs. The modern appliance that magicians use has no resemblance

to a modern cooking utensil, or anything else found outside the magic shop.

The Ball and Vase trick was originally designed with an egg rather than a ball. The prop resembled an egg cup, which most of that period's residents had often seen at their breakfasts.

The card box was once designed to represent a cigarette case. The Paddle Trick was first likely done with an ordinary table knife. Worse still, most magic props don't even pretend to look familiar, as they raise suspicion with their bright colors, dragon decals and chrome. Magicians are attracted like crows to these bright, shiny objects.

These props and old books are proudly on display in their homes, but now have little purpose aside from being "collectable." They join stamps, thimbles and spoons as objects for private accumulation — the subject of a passive hobby that ignores the practical function that they once served. While such collections preserve a portion of magic's history, the act of collecting has nothing to do with the art in magic. There also exist collectors of secrets who hoard information, which is never put to use for either bettering their lives, or the edification or amusement of others. When one of the hoarders' secrets is exposed, he feels as though his home has been burglarized, his possessions ravaged. General outrage erupts, petitions are signed in magic societies, and the offending "traitor" is ostracized. The truth is, more secrets are revealed through incompetence and insensitivity than through flagrant exposure.

Magic conventions and lectures, as we know them, did not exist prior to the 1950s. There were only informal gatherings for the exchange of information and ideas. There was no registration fee, and merchandising was conspicuously absent. The modern convention is a three-day dealer show, broken up only by meals

and recess, for the purchase of novelties and items demonstrated during the day's presentations.

Lecture circuits are also a recent phenomenon, an artificially produced market in response to magicians' wants, not their needs. The immediately accessible is valued over substance.

Disappointed, indeed, are the patrons of a lecture who have no purchase available at the conclusion of the "instruction." They long for books to fill their shelves and toys to carry home, which in short order, all amusement exhausted, find their way to the bottom of a drawer.

Magicians seem to be more interested in what is new and novel than in what is good. They are resigned to cleverness for its own sake, independent of purpose.

This applies equally to sleight-of-hand magic. Technique has made rapid and prodigious progress in recent times. Effects, on the other hand, have become more confused, to the point of being incomprehensible. Nothing is communicated. Perhaps this is the type of thing Albert Einstein alluded to when he said, "Mankind's greatest problem is a perfection of means and a confusion of ends."

You would think, with all this information being bandied about, that magicians' acts would abound in originality. This is not so, however, as the majority are doing the same few hackneyed tricks. For example, in the early part of the century, vaudeville houses all over the country had signs constructed specifically for their magic acts: "NO EGG BAGS." This testified to the exhaustion of that particular trick.

In lieu of creativity and industry, some magicians elect to plunder what they are unwilling to earn. Occasionally, someone

exceptional will step forward from the crowd with a new idea or presentation. These originations are eventually taken by others and, in an act of creative memory, are made “their own.” When the originator then performs his creation, magicians, having only seen the imitators, label his work as “stock,” which therefore becomes common property, ripe for the picking.

The estimable performer and author, Ricky Jay, relates the story of a magician who took a “piece” from his act, complete in every detail. When confronted with his crime, the thief told Ricky, “You’ve already taken all the *good* tricks!” In fact, Ricky had sought out unexplored territory, and through his work and creativity, had transformed it into something *good*.

There is a wealth of concepts and ideas in print that awaits the conscientious, industrious performer – that performer who can recognize them and reap their hidden worth.

John Carney
Carneycopia
1991

Let's end our discussion with an outlier essay—one that would not fit neatly into any category except its own. Like Mr. Carney's previous musings on the magic community, Max Maven records an observation of his own: that amateurs and professionals ought not to mix equally. My guess is that when Max wrote this piece in MAGIC Magazine nearly twenty years ago, one of his intentions was to ruffle feathers. In that he greatly succeeded. People are still talking about it, pro and con.

In one of the many letters to the editor in the months that followed, T.A. Waters tempered Max's message nicely: "If you don't walk the walk, you can talk the talk with somebody else."

DIVISIVE AND ILLUSION

BY MAX MAVEN

Somewhere in the world there is a magic convention that Jay Marshall hasn't attended, or a pocket of show business with which he is unfamiliar. Mind you, I haven't found any examples, but I assume they must exist.

A number of years ago I attended a NYCAN convention in Rochester, New York. Jay, of course, was also in attendance. In the area there was a museum of circus memorabilia that was still undergoing collation, and hence not open to the public. Jay, of course, had a connection, and scored an invitation from the curator to come and see the collection. In return, Jay invited the curator to come to the convention. Upon their arrival they ran into me in the hotel lobby, and we had a pleasant conversation. Stay with me; this story actually goes somewhere. A couple of nights later, following the last gala show, the convention organizers threw a party in one of the hotel suites. Jay, of course, was there, with the curator in tow. We got to talking, and I asked the fellow to tell me his impressions of the convention. He said he'd had a nice time, and enjoyed the shows. However, there was one aspect of the event that he had found rather perplexing:

There in that hotel suite he saw top pro magicians mingling with every level of amateur, and this seemed very strange.

In the world of the circus, he explained, there are many amateurs who live and breathe circus lore. They follow the shows, collect the memorabilia, study the history. Some even practice various circus arts, and achieve significant levels of proficiency.

And the professional circus performers won't have anything to do with them.

Oh, they're not cruel about it; they don't go out of their way to be rude. They will say hello. They will sign autographs. But they won't mingle.

At the time, I thought this sounded like a splendid idea. I still do. And, having stated this, I know full well that I have just antagonized the vast majority of readers of this magazine. But why, pray tell, is magic apparently the only field of human endeavor where such distinctions are willfully ignored? I do not presume to have an answer, but perhaps when your anger settles you'll take a moment to consider the question.

The idea of automatically according equal rank to any person who enters into the study of magic is equivalent to granting a graduate degree to every college freshman on their first day on campus. This is a notion which seems to have come into existence only during the past seventy years. (Curiously enough, that is also the approximate age of the International Brotherhood of Magicians, but I won't explore that coincidence because I've already exceeded the Alienation Quotient for this month.)

I am well aware of the argument which contends that distinctions between amateurs and professionals are wrong, because after all, every professional started as an amateur. This is quite true.

It is also true that the page you are currently reading began as pulp wood, but if you think that wood pulp is the same as printed text then I'd hate to see your library.

Then there's the etymological approach: The word amateur is derived from the Latin word *amas*, "to love" — and thus it really means one who does something for the love of it, therefore all of us are, technically, amateurs. Yeah, well. I love Junior Walker records, and I can't play the saxophone worth a damn.

Don't get me wrong; I don't dislike amateurs. Some of my best friends are amateurs. Okay, not that many — but there are a few. And one of the reasons those friendships work is that my amateur magician friends acknowledge that there really is a difference.

And well there should be. I recently had extensive work done on my teeth. You won't be surprised to learn that I chose a professional dentist. And not a semi-pro, either. The way I figure it, my pro dentist approaches his work just a bit differently than would a person who, enamored of dentistry, collects drills and spit bowls.

My teeth came out just fine, thank you.

Max Maven
MAGIC
1992

MAX MAVEN

Max Maven is a distinguished performer, lecturer, creator, author and historian on magic and mentalism, with an impressive list of television credits, awards, and honors. He is currently the star of a reality magic series in Israel.



EPILOGUE



ART IN MAGIC

"ART IS A FORM OF MAGIC DESIGNED AS
A MEDIATOR BETWEEN THIS STRANGE,
HOSTILE WORLD, AND US."

-PICASSO

Is magic art? The world's greatest magicians have pleaded their cases that magic belongs alongside theater, dance, and the visual arts as a viable means of expression. And if you have read this far into a book on magic theory, I trust that you, too, believe that magic—in the right hands—can become art.

Of that there is little difference of opinion. But where this topic becomes fascinating is in the proofs. Sure, we can all point to moments of powerful magic—we know it when we see it. But how can magic become art in our hands?

Ever the pragmatist, Darwin Ortiz wrote, “My own feeling is that, if we can improve the generally low level of craft in magic, the art aspect will take care of itself.” I love that line. And this one too, by art critic Simon Schama: “Art is craft plus imagination.”

So, what makes magic art? Henning Nelms believes the key is an emotion—drama.

DRAMA AS MAGIC

BY HENNING NELMS

Drama, like conjuring, is an art of illusion. A play does not take place on the stage but in the minds of the spectators. What really happens is that a troupe of actors repeats a carefully rehearsed routine before an obviously artificial setting. The audience, however, misinterprets this as a series of exciting events in the lives of the characters.

Forcing spectators to interpret what they see and hear in ways which they know are false comes as close to genuine magic as we are likely to get. The everyday illusions of the legitimate stage put all but the best conjuring performances to shame. Even a second-rate play convinces spectators of “facts” which they know are not true. It can go further and use these imaginary “facts” to wring real tears from the eyes of the audience. Everyone is aware that a leading lady on Broadway receives a salary which puts her in the upper tax brackets. Nevertheless, this knowledge does not keep audiences from sobbing over her poverty when she impersonates a homeless waif.

The magic of drama is infinitely more powerful than the magic of trickery. It is as available to the conjurer as it is to the actor. The only difference is that actors take it for granted, whereas few conjurers are even aware that it exists.

Henning Nelms

Showmanship for Magicians, 1969

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In the next piece, Ken Weber motivates us to aspire to more than just puzzles or tricks, and to give spectators an extraordinary moment. When we achieve that, we find ourselves in the midst of an artistically pure moment.

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THE HIERARCHY OF MYSTERY ENTERTAINMENT

BY KEN WEBER

From our side of the fence, we do “effects.” From the spectator’s side, our routines fall into one of three broad categories:

1. Puzzle
2. Trick
3. Extraordinary Moment

While the lines between these categories are exceedingly blurry, most magic performed around the world falls into the first category: Puzzles. The spectator intuitively knows that what he has just seen is, to one degree or another, impossible, improbable, or just weird. He can’t figure it out, but he assumes that if he knew the secret, he too could pull it off.

A trick is a demonstration of perceived skill, and therefore is more impressive than a puzzle. I say perceived skill because the audience doesn’t care whether the signed card found its way into your wallet via a beautifully executed one-handed palm or one of the “no-palming-required” methods. Either way, you got it in there so you get credited with possessing a highly specialized and secret skill.

Overwhelmingly, professional magicians perform Tricks.

That's not a pejorative statement. Tricks have the ability to thoroughly and satisfyingly entertain. The pantheon of magic's elite thrill us—and their non-magical audiences—with Tricks.

An Extraordinary Moment leaves no room for explanation. The viewer gasps for air rather than grasp for a method. Skill is not an issue.

A perfectly executed Balducci Levitation is an Extraordinary Moment. Four Jokers that change into four Kings may elicit cries of “No freakin’ way,” but it's not an Extraordinary Moment; it's a terrific Trick.

A good number of the routines on David Blaine's first couple of TV specials attained Extraordinary Moment status. He literally rendered speechless many of his spectators. As magicians, we know that few of his effects required more than a moderate level of manual dexterity, yet again and again the reactions approached religious ecstasy. (I understand that we saw what the video editors wanted us to see. That's not the issue. What we did see was a series of extraordinary reactions.)

Mentalists, more than magicians, perform Extraordinary Moments. The particular nature of what they appear to do—delving into the minds of their audiences—engenders an intimacy with the performer that cannot be matched with demonstrations of skill, regardless of how mysterious they may be.

Close-up performers have more opportunities to deliver Extraordinary Moments than stage performers. The physical separation between the stage performer and the audience works against his achieving anything more than Tricks. Awesome, wonderful, hugely entertaining perhaps, but stage conjuring

will always, with only the rare exception, fall within the Trick category.

What do you do? If you perform puzzles exceedingly well, you can be the life of the party. You can also make a living behind the counter at a magic shop.

People enjoy puzzles: anagrams, crossword puzzles, brainteasers. They're fun. They're also commonplace, and rarely reward the performer with a lasting career.

Superb Tricks, and the occasional Extraordinary Moment: those should be your goals.

BONA FIDE MAGIC

What if you could perform real magic? You wave your hand and a cork floats up to your fingers. You rub torn pieces of paper together and they become whole again. You put three coins in your hand, close your fingers around them, and only two coins remain. You reach forward and produce a coin or a card from the air.

What if you really could do those things? Would you do them *in front of an audience*? Why?

And if you did choose to work your miracles for an audience, what would your demeanor be?

Perhaps that would depend on how difficult any particular feat was.

Would your audience become emotionally involved by watching you?

Emotions lubricate the entertainment engine. Emotions generate real magic.

STALKING THE EXTRAORDINARY MOMENT

The stronger the magic, the less need for “showmanship.”

The typical cups and balls routine involves a cascading series of mini-climaxes. Balls appear and vanish and reappear— here, then there, then back again—all capped with a kicker ending. The best performers of this classic effect use charm and wit, along with their magic, to hold the audience’s attention.

Compare that with Blaine’s presentation of the Raven. A boy out on a barren lot somewhere in Middle America... a coin on his hand is there... David waves his hand over the coin, and the coin is not there. Vanished! The boy stands, transfixed, perplexed. After a long moment, he softly mutters, while still staring at his hand, “Cool.”

Between the best cups and balls routine and Blaine’s Raven, which will be remembered a week later? The spectators at the Magic Castle enjoyed the balls mystifyingly coming and going—that is, the tricks—while that scruffy kid had an Extraordinary Moment: a coin disappeared from his hand! No props, no moves that he was aware of, not one word of useless patter.

Warning: Do not take this as invitation to copy Blaine’s style.

His laconic, half-stoned persona probably fits you like a cheap suit on a humid day. I just want to point out that Extraordinary Moments can be brought forth from props and effects you already own.

It’s you who makes the moment trivial.

It’s you who can make the moment extraordinary.

MAGIC FOR MAGICIANS VS. MAGIC FOR EVERYONE ELSE

When you read a magic book or magazine, if the description of the “effect” goes on for more than a couple of sentences, it’s probably best done for other magicians. Laypeople want direct plots. Anything else is magical masturbation, done because it makes you feel good, and no one else.

What do people remember? It’s easy to find out—just ask someone who recently saw a magician or mentalist to tell you what they saw. You’ll hear responses similar to these:

“This guy put a nickel and dime in my hand and when I opened my hand the dime disappeared.”

“He had this girl look at a word in a book and he told her the word she was thinking about .”

“I picked a card and

...he told me what it was”

...it jumped into his pocket.”

...he tore it up and put it back together.”

“Siegfried put Roy in a box and covered it for a second and then Roy was gone and a tiger was there!”

“He floated!”

Take a look at a magic book or magazine and see how effects could be described that succinctly. Typically, you see card tricks that involve red cards from blue back decks, counting weak climaxes, and convoluted plots that force the audience follow the action closely.

That’s magic for us and our buddies. It won’t get you repeat gigs.

Consider this excerpt from an interview with David Blaine that appeared in *Newsday*, the Long Island, New York newspaper, on November 7, 2002. Reporter David Behrens wrote the story, and the interview took place in Blaine's New York City apartment.

[Blaine] produces a fresh, unopened deck of cards.

When the deck is thoroughly shuffled, he fans the cards and asks one of his visitors: "Think of a card"

He places the deck on the arm of a chair and he will not touch the deck again. The visitor is instructed to pick up the deck, hold it in his left hand and announce which card selected.

"The three of hearts," the visitor says.

"Now cut the deck somewhere in the middle," Blaine says. The deck is cut and the top half of the cards set aside.

"That's your card," Blaine says, indicating the top card on the lower half of the deck.

The visitors are silent, astonished.

The card, naturally, is the three of hearts.

Now, first fight the urge to analyze the "how" of the effect. Newspaper reporters are no better than others at accurately remembering all the details of a trick, so this may not be exactly what transpired.

The important issue here is that, as in most of Blaine's magic, overt "show business" never makes an appearance, and the plot—think of a card, cut the cards, that's your card—could

not be more to the point. The spectators had an Extraordinary Moment. They sat “silent, astonished.”

The stronger the magic, the less need for showmanship. The corollary, naturally, must be that weaker magic requires more help from the performer, and that’s where lack of natural talent rears its ugly head. If you’re not an extroverted or dramatic person in real life, you especially need to raise your showmanship level for your less powerful effects. (You’ll learn how later on!)

Most performed magic is weak, and most magic sold in magic shops or written about in the magic periodicals is best performed only for others interested in the art.

The best performed magic and mentalism have always been and always will be, direct, immediately understandable and compelling enough to be recalled days later.
How much of your show fits that description?

THE TRIVIALIZATION OF MAGIC

Routines tumble down the above hierarchy (i.e. Extraordinary Moments become Tricks, and Tricks become Puzzles) because of the attitude of the performer. When he treats a trick—or any magical moment—as easy, commonplace, or anything other than special, he dulls the impact of that routine. A trivial stunt by definition cannot be special, yet we see this attitude every day in magic.

A specific example: On the Website for L&L Publishing (llpub.com) I came across a video clip from one of the most respected performers and teachers in magic, Michael Ammar. The Website blurb said: “Michael Ammar does the impossible as he performs The Floating Lifesaver’ in this clip from ‘Easy To Master Thread Miracles’ Volume 3.”

Here's what we see: Michael, standing in front of the usual L&L audience of excessively enthusiastic and good-looking young adults, starts by saying, *"You know, when I was growing up, my favorite candy was a Lifesaver, you know...and I used to eat these little things and think 'Why are these 'life savers'?' I mean, 'cause as a kid I'm just like, well, these must, like, save people's lives, and I didn't realize it was like this little thing that you would throw overboard and everything. But Lifesavers to me always represented this really amazing, uh, possibility, you know, so I thought I'd do something with a Lifesaver. Now let's see, I'm gonna see if I can't get it trained here... let's see..."*

And he whistles at the Lifesaver as if it were a cute pet and sure enough, it moves, then floats around in front of him and finally it floats all the way up into his mouth.

After the candy floats up to his mouth, he laughs along with the spectators, and says, "Isn't that neat?"

Now, lest you misunderstand my comments, this is a brilliant and baffling effect. (And my guess is that Michael does not perform in this manner for paid gigs.) The candy truly floats around in wonderfully mysterious ways.

But what's with the patter? It's not especially funny; it doesn't tell the audience anything fascinating or clever or interesting. Instead, it almost mocks the magic itself by momentarily shifting the focus to the young Michael and his sweet tooth and his questions about candy. Then the hackneyed ploy of whistling at an object before it moves, which may play fine at children's shows, but serves little purpose when presented to adults.

“But Lifesavers to me always represented this really amazing, uhhh, possibility, you know, so I thought I’d do something with a Lifesaver.” Why did they represent an amazing possibility? It’s a non-sequitur that is suddenly thrown into the patter.

“So I thought I’d do something with a Lifesaver”

“Do something?” It sounds so casual. Not mysterious, not funny, not dramatic, it’s the type of remark that might be said by an interior decorator—“let’s puhleeeze do something with that window treatment!”—but it’s not terribly appropriate for a miracle worker.

Again, this trick is a piece of strong magic. It’s the Presentation that squelches a potential Extraordinary Moment into a very nice Trick.

Think about every word you say. Analyze your every action. This is not a quick process. I watched that brief clip many times ore I began to appreciate its strengths and the potential areas for improvement.

You want your presentational skills to equal or exceed magic technique. Both goals require time, dedication, and effort.

All magic, at its core, is a Puzzle. Presentation—presentation only—is the lever that elevates a Puzzle to a Trick or a Trick to an Extraordinary Moment.

Raise your level.

Ken Weber

Maximum Entertainment

2003

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Lest you think a conversation about art in magic must be lofty and abstract, I have opted to include a rather specific, practical piece by Tommy Wonder. Here he demonstrates a technique we can use to heighten the drama of a presentation, and move it in closer proximity to the realm of art.

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SECONDHAND DRAMA

TOMMY WONDER,
WITH STEPHEN MINCH

Suppose that one day I told you a story of how I drove my car along the streets of Amsterdam, traveling along the canals. A dog suddenly crosses the road in front of me. I try to miss it, my car slips, hits a tree and dives into the canal! After a harrowing struggle I manage to get out of the car. Then, luckily, a small boat comes along and I am saved.

If I tell you this story in a lively and captivating way, it can be considered entertaining. I entrance and interest you. You are able to imagine yourself in my place, experiencing what I experienced. Fine.

Although my telling you this story can be interesting, I could make you experience it in a much more dramatic way. To do that I would take you to Amsterdam where we would walk along the canals. You see a dog suddenly cross the street. A car tries to avoid the dog but slips, hits a tree and plunges into the canal! After a time the driver escapes from the car, swims a while and eventually is picked up by a boat.

Because you *see* this happen, it obviously makes a much stronger impression on you; the experience is far deeper than

that felt while hearing me merely recount the incident. That this entire scenario was planned and arranged by me for your entertainment, and that it was performed by a stunt man and a trained dog, doesn't detract from this and is beside the point. But what if I want to make this experience even deeper and more dramatic for you? To do this I handle the story in a much different manner.

This time I *take* you in my car for a ride through Amsterdam. Before we start this ride I make some secret arrangements. Trained dog and man in boat are ready. Measures have been taken to assure that everything is safe and nothing can go wrong. Now here we go!

You are sitting next to me in the car, driving happily along the canals. Suddenly there's a dog... well, you know the rest.

What you experience this time, I'm sure, will make such an impact on you that I doubt you'll ever forget it. The difference in the impact of the first example and this last one is enormous. My telling a story is nothing compared with your actually experiencing our hitting the tree, going into the water and getting soaked. This is the ride of a lifetime!

What am I trying to say here? This difference in impact is important. You can see the difference in the strengths of various forms of drama. The first example is one of secondhand drama, where you are told a story but it isn't happening at the time. This has a rather weak impact. It is something that can be easily forgotten. Still it has plot, emotion, conflict, suspense and other qualities.

Drama like that in the second example, where you personally witness the happening, that is, firsthand drama—has a much greater impact. This is something that you will not so easily

forget. The plot, emotion, conflict and suspense are the same. Yet, although you are only a witness (you are not actually involved) the event will move and touch you much more than the simple telling of the incident can.

The third example is also a form of drama. It is firsthand, like the second example, but now you are no longer a spectator. You are involved! Again, the plot, emotion and suspense are the same—but the impact is devastating, and you will never forget how you were a part of the event.

The example of a car accident is extreme. I didn't use this accident because I especially enjoy perilous drama, but because it forcefully illustrates the underlying idea I wish us to examine. How this applies to magic will be obvious. The first two types of drama are easy to achieve in a stage performance. The third type would be far more difficult to accomplish on stage. In a close-up environment, however, all three types can be contrived, although the third type, where the spectator is no longer a passive witness, but personally involved, will still be the most difficult one to realize.

For instance, let's say you do a card trick during which you tell the audience about a gambler who once challenged you to find the aces after he had shuffled them into the deck. As you relate the story, you re-create your feat with the cards. This can be a good piece of drama, but no matter how well it is done, the impact is limited: it is secondhand drama, like the retelling of the car accident.

With this in mind, consider the Lighter to Matchbox effect. The lighter doesn't work and you go on to solve the problem. If it is well acted, the spectators feel that they are witnessing your confrontation of an unexpected problem, and they watch, genuinely involved, as you surmount it. This, like our second

example with the car, is firsthand drama. Here is not just a story told about something; it really happens at that very moment. If performed with the same believability as your recounting of the story of the gambler, it will have greater dramatic potential, simply because it is a stronger form of drama, and isn't so easily forgotten.

Tricks in which the wrong card is chosen or the magician seems unable to find the selection are frequently performed, and if played well are examples of firsthand drama. There are, however, other paths to firsthand drama than that in which the trick seems to go awry.

Consider the third type of presentation, that illustrated by our taking the spectator along as the car plunges into the river. This type of drama is harder to achieve, but with close-up magic it is definitely possible. If, for example, you could press someone into doing something, without the audience recognizing that you are managing his actions, you would have the sort of immediate drama for which we are striving. Let's say this person is into shuffling the aces into the deck and slamming it in front of you with the demand that you find them now! You can imagine the impact it will create if you then find the aces. The audience would never forget it. Things like this can be set up to happen. It is difficult but nevertheless attainable. Such seemingly impromptu happenings are the strongest form of drama possible. For that audience you very well might be an instant star, the best magician they'll ever see.

The idea is obvious. Although secondhand drama is fine and can be effective, ask yourself if it is possible to upgrade the drama. Try if you can to turn it into firsthand drama. Don't just show things; let them *happen!* Their impact will be much stronger. Sometimes not much is needed to upgrade the presentation of a

trick; and if you are ever able to raise a presentation to the third type of drama, the results are extraordinary.

Although going for the highest impact possible may seem logical, I don't believe you should always go for the third type of drama, where the spectator becomes a fully active player. If all your tricks were of that nature, the impact would be so high, you could easily wear out the audience. High-impact drama has so profound an effect it is hard to handle a lot of it during the short time consumed by a magic performance.

Audiences are limited in what they can endure, so such strong stuff should be used with moderation. After a high-impact trick spectators should be given enough time to catch their breath before they are hit hard again.

Still, it is desirable that your magic have *some* firsthand drama, rather than all secondhand drama, which is the only presentational style seen in so many magicians' acts. Most magic performances could use some strong upgrading, for watching magic without real involvement becomes boring very quickly.

Tommy Wonder
The Books of Wonder
1996

As we near the end of our journey, we revisit the sage words of Nevil Maskelyne, who makes one of the earliest (and best) cases for magic as art. It is because of this essay that I have called this final chapter “Art in Magic” rather than “Art of Magic.” As you will soon see, there is a significant difference. The “Art of Magic” speaks to the effect of magic on people. The “Art in Magic” speaks to the effect of the magician on magic.

THE REAL SECRETS OF MAGIC

BY NEVIL MASKELYNE

As in painting, so also in magic. To produce a magical effect of original conception is a work of high art. It imitates the exercise of magical powers, by means and in a manner conceived by the artist who produced it. To reproduce a magical effect, exactly as already conceived and executed by an artist in magic, is false art. It merely imitates the original imitation; and, in actual value, is just as worthless as a painting copied from another painting. Any weakling may be taught how to do that kind of thing; and, having learned his lesson, may earn an income equivalent to the value of a weakling's work.

Yet, in spite of the truth of the foregoing statements, many of those who practice magic, either as a means of livelihood or as an intellectual recreation, appear to be entirely ignorant of the very existence of facts such as those we have reviewed. In all probability, those men would feel highly offended were any doubt cast upon their claim to be regarded as artists. Yet, in all they do, they prove themselves to be mere mechanics. They can do just what somebody else has already done—and they can do nothing more. Such men are not artists. They cannot be; since,

in all their works, the only kind of art displayed is the false art, which is an imitation of real art.

The class of man above indicated represents a type that must be very familiar to all. The methods adopted by such men are of common knowledge. Suppose, for instance, Mr. Artist produces a novel and successful effect. No sooner has he done so than Mr. Copyist becomes on the alert, and forthwith proceeds to haunt the place wherein Mr. Artist's performances are given. By means of persistent observation, aided perhaps by accident, by means of purchase from some other imitator, or, it may be, by means of bribery and corruption, Mr. Copyist eventually acquires the knowledge and equipment requisite for the reproduction of the novel effect. That end having been attained, one might think that Mr. Copyist would need to gain nothing more at Mr. Artist's expense. Generally, however, that is far from being the case. Although he has become possessed of the technical requirements connected with the effect he seeks to reproduce, Mr. Copyist even then is not content to take off his coat and do a little meritorious work. Having got what he wanted in order to reproduce the effect, he might surely be expected to infuse some spice of originality into his reproduction. But, no! He will not trouble himself even to that slight extent. He does not mind expending his time in gathering the crumbs that fall from another's table; but he has a rooted objection to expending energy in making his own bread. So he continues to attend Mr. Artist's performances until, in the course of time, he has learned by heart every word Mr. Artist says, every inflection of Mr. Artist's voice, and every movement and gesture Mr. Artist makes. Then, and then only, is Mr. Copyist prepared to set to work on his own account. And when his reproduction is exhibited, what is it? Generally speaking, it is but a pale reflection of the original

work of art. At the best, it is merely slavish imitation; and, as such, has no artistic value.

On several occasions, we have made an experiment which is always interesting. That experiment has been tried upon copyists, clinging to the skirts of various arts, including magic. It consists in saying to Mr. Copyist, at the conclusion of his performance, "I had only to close my eyes, and I could almost have believed it was Mr. Artist who was performing." Thereupon, Mr. Copyist has, invariably, assumed an expression of smug satisfaction, and has given thanks for the great compliment (?) paid him! If he could only have realized what was passing in the mind of the person to whom his thanks were addressed—but, there, his mental caliber, of course, forbids any such exercise of intelligence. Yet, one cannot help coveting the blissful ignorant and the sublime impudence which enable such a man to pose as an artist. The possession of an intellect so obtuse, and a hide so pachydermatous, must confer upon the possessor a degree of self-satisfaction unknown to men of real ability.

Nevil Maskelyne

Our Magic

1911

NEVIL MASKLEYNE

Nevil Maskelyne (1863-1924) was the son of famous magician John Nevil Maskelyne and the father of Jasper Maskelyne. Like his father before him and his son after him, Nevil performed his illusions at Egyptian Hall in London. In addition to being a renowned magician, Nevil was an early pioneer of radio communication.



Our last essay exemplifies in written form what our magic must strive for: a clear vision, aspirations to deeply engage and mystify our audience, and a personal point of view.

MEANING AND VISION

BY DERREN BROWN

What is the magical experience?

“Astonishment is not an emotion that’s created. It’s an existing state that’s revealed.”

“The experience of astonishment is the experience of a clear, primal state of mind that they associate with a child’s state of mind.”

“At that moment of trying to box the unboxable your world-view breaks up. The boxes are gone. And what’s left? Simply what was always there. Your natural state of mind. That’s the moment of astonishment.”

Those lines are taken from Paul Harris’ introduction to his *The Art of Astonishment*, and give a clear and very interesting model of understanding what the experience of magic might be. However, this idea that astonishment is also our primal state of mind seems a little too convenient for us as magicians. It is dangerously flattering to ourselves to believe that we are putting people in touch with something primal and perfect through the very act of performing magic. The problem is the temptation to theorize and unify a practice that is in its nature entirely

pragmatic and opportunistic. One should certainly have a clear sense of what one wishes to achieve with one's magic, but at the same time when one is dealing with a craft, and occasionally an art, that is in itself a beautiful demonstration of how misleading our models of the world can be, one must be wary of objectifying that vision and mistaking it for reality.

As far as any statements can be made, I think that the situation is as follows. The experience of magic is not a universal; it is a direct result of the communications given by the individual performer. These communications may be intentional or otherwise. For example, if an irritating magician insists on performing for a spectator and the latter remains annoyed, then that spectator's experience of magic will be annoyance. Not a wonderful link to a primal, child-like state of mind. The experience of magic may be no more than the possibly quite mundane response of an individual spectator at any one time, for the magic does not happen anywhere other than in her perceptions at a particular moment. To insist that magic is somehow important and inherently cathartic when one is not making it so is nonsense. Magic is not inherently anything. It is what you sell it as.

Failure to understand this can lead only to misguided pretension on the one hand as well as trivialising our art on the other. Any magician who says what magic 'does' in a grand way is expressing his vision, which he hopefully communicates in his performance. His words have the same weight as those of the performer that insists that it is a vehicle for 'having a bit of fun' and no more. Each is expressing his vision, and each, if he performs true to his vision, will make it true. Neither is correct, and both are. This is due to the unique nature of magic, in that it only happens in the minds of a spectator. If that spectator does not perceive the magic, it does not happen. Even if you are playing the part of that spectator, when you practice alone, that

role has been filled. Accepting this, it is dangerous to insist that magic has any inherent qualities.

In understanding this, the issue then becomes one of creating an experience for the audience. Imagine for just a second that you were to put this book down in order to pour yourself a steaming cup of Earl Grey or chat to one of your delightful friends, only to find this handsome volume gone when you turned back to retrieve it. Your experience would be one of bewilderment, rapidly followed by backtracking through your remembered experience to find out what you must have done to misplace the book. You would be doubtless very confused, and would start hunting for it around the place where you sat. You would move position to gain a more comprehensive perspective on a confounding situation.

This experience is not particularly child-like, neither is it magical. It is one of bewilderment, and of rapid rationalising to find possible lacunae³ in your understanding. You are eager to grasp a solution, and to relieve your mind by assigning meaning to the experience.

If magic were to be performed without any meaning attached to it, I imagine the end result would be something similar. However, the moment a spectator realises his role as witness/audience to a performance by a magician, much meaning has already been ascribed to the situation. The spectator knows that he is not to take it too seriously, and that he is being fooled for the purposes of his entertainment. The common experiences we have of things seemingly disappearing and similar confusions are probably close to what magic would feel like if we were offered no clues, context or meaning. In such a situation, we see

3. noun – a blank gap or missing part.

I had to look it up, so I thought I would save you the trouble. —Josh

that we would run through a rapid internal reality check that would continue until a solution was offered or we simply gave up worrying and dismissed the confusion with a laugh.

The difference between this sort of bewilderment and the experience of 'astonishment' that magic should produce in one way or another, is the fact that in the latter case, the bewilderment is given a set of references and a context in which it operates, so that the spectator is given the option of finding the bewilderment satisfying, and seeing value in it. The more resonant the magic, the more satisfying it will be, unless the intention of the magician is purposefully to dissatisfy for deeper aesthetic reasons. Thus magic has no pure form: in a pure form it is merely confusion, not magic at all. It becomes magic when the performer gives it shape in the mind of his audience. He may believe it to be about achieving a child-like state of wonder or some such notion, but this is just his choice of shape, and if he does not deliver the goods in performance, then he is deluding himself.

Magic, therefore, is only inherently about how the performer decides to frame it. This is a behavioural issue regarding the performer, not an identity issue regarding the material.

How you decide to frame your magic, whether or not you find yourself responding to the frame I give it, will be irrelevant - for all the same reasons - unless you can effectively communicate that framing to your audience. If you don't communicate it, it doesn't exist, and you're not doing what you think you're doing. Ascribing Meaning in the Place of Confusion: Determining the Vision.

The first task of the effective performer is to decide upon what meaning his magic should have. And then, to be true to this vision, he should delude himself into believing that vision to be absolutely true. If that vision is one of magic as a light-hearted

blend of comedy and puzzling tricks, then so be it. If it is one of a dark and disturbing art-form, then so be that too.

There can be no short-cut to achieving an artistic vision of any sort, unless one borrows from another artist. This, of course, does not achieve the goal of arriving at a vision that will define the artist, although it may allow him to adopt a style, and feel second-best. From my own experience, the growing magician starts off pretty much without any discernible style, delighting in packet tricks and bad clothing. If he comes to adopt a style, it is of a generic, fast-talking, vaguely humiliating and bouncy magic-man. The magician, when asked to perform a trick, will shift from being a perfectly pleasant, sweet young man into Mr. Light Entertainment, developing suddenly exaggerated body-movements and, in England at least traces of a regional accent that is not his own. He will say words that are obviously “lines” people will recognise his “patter” as being such, and any connection to the person they knew and liked only moments before will be severed the moment the card box is opened. Any experience of real magic is lost before the game starts.

Then, through a series of events that radically alter his approach to performance, as well as through time and consideration, that magician will hopefully come to settle into his performance. Instead of communicating tension and weirdness, he will resonate complete congruity with his performing persona. The material he performs will reflect that persona, and the congruity will expand further. As that happens, the audience will sense real professionalism, and also feel utterly confident in his hands. I am describing an ideal path for the growing performer, but we are all aware of the almost tangible difference between a comfortable professional performance and an uncomfortable amateurish one. The former will control a room, the latter will suck all energy from it like an extractor fan.

The hobbyist performing for his local club is not expected to fill the clubhouse with a well-honed presence. But any magician working professionally who should know better has no business insulting an audience, especially one trying to eat, with sub-standard performance. Few things annoy me more than paying to watch bad, self-indulgent performance, let alone having it thrust upon me while I am enjoying a meal with my few remaining friends.

Clearly we all have to start somewhere, which is why I emphasise that I am criticising those performers who should know better. We watch a first-time stand-up comedian die at the open mike and cringe in embarrassment and hope that he will go away and change his material, but we don't resent him for it (as long as he refrains from blaming the audience for not being responsive). But when a more established comedian who is working the circuit stands before us and is blatantly unfunny from beginning to end, we have reason to feel insulted. If a reasonably seasoned performer cannot see that his audiences are not responding, then he must re-think his material, not force it on further audiences. A performer may be so enamoured with himself that he is blind to audience apathy or irritation, but that is not a pleasant thing to watch.

Jesus, let it go. Take a chill pill.

The magician who does control a room and richly satisfies his audience will have a vision of what he feels his magic to be. That vision will have arisen out of years of defining his performance and the development of a style. The vision will propel the magic and give it meaning, while the style is the natural expression of that vision. If the magician comes to feel that magic is about the creation of a particular feeling, then everything in his being will point towards and encourage that feeling. And the 'vision' will be just that: the magician will have in his mind a clear image

of idealised magic performance, and will strive to achieve that. He will know when he has failed and sold himself short, and the humiliation stings for a long time. But he will also know when he has touched that ideal, and created exactly what he feels magic should be.

My own vision - and the one with which this book deals - is one of magic that feels real, and ultimately serious (though not necessarily solemn). In close-up quarters it suggests a magic which is charming and gentle in tone, but devastating in content. On stage or television I can afford to be more openly disturbing, but when I am invited into the space of a few spectators, I must respect that. It is a vision of magic that enthralls and emotionally touches rather than just entertains, although it also encompasses a variety of light-hearted amusements too, for I am paid to entertain. It is also very much based around character/ego issues: it is not a social vision, or one that contains a message that pertains to anything other than the performance. The message of the performance is the performance itself. It is about a commingling of character and material that is deeply affecting, and which will transport the spectators for a while to a magical plane, through deft emotional involvement. I don't mind if they know it's all illusion, but I would like them to feel that that is not the point. And finally, I would like them to attach all those feelings back to me as a performer, so that I create a certain level of intrigue about myself in their eyes - and to walk away from the performance looking at the world with a wider perspective.

In my mind these things form a picture - a literal vision - and I can do everything to ensure that the reality of the situation gets as close to that picture as possible. Few will share my vision exactly as I see it, but I absolutely have to believe that it is the way of performing magic while making sure that it does indeed provide the response I expect it to. It is pointless presuming that

the floating ring effect that I have described is better just because it conforms to my principles: it must then get the response I wish it to, otherwise I am deluding myself. The important point is not so much the individual aspirations of the performer, but whether they make for better magic, and whether he can congruently perform in a way that attains them.

As for how one arrives at such an imaginary picture of how magic performance should be, the process will begin, usually, negatively. One normally decides first what one does not wish to do. I realised early on that I would not feel comfortable performing rope magic, neither would I be entirely happy with coins, and never would I be a home to Mr. and Mrs. Sponge Ball. The first task is to question what the reasons for one's preferences may then be: if not this material or these props, then what? And why? And as one begins to form a sense of one's preferred material, a feeling for what one would most like to achieve in performance starts to form.

Another question here would be - what exactly do I want my audience to feel has occurred, and what do I want them to think of me? For magicians who do not keep this question in mind as they design and perform material, no clear answers will develop. The magician will just do the trick as best as he can, and then move to another one. If pressed, he will say that the audience should feel amazed and amused by his skill.

This brings us back to the analogy of the violin cadenza in the symphony. Appreciation of skill can enhance the magic, if it happens within a certain context. Or returning to our hero metaphor, we need to appreciate as an audience that the hero is equipped with certain skills that make him intriguing in some way. If the audience understands that we have the deftness of response, enviable physical dexterity and ability psychologically to manipulate that they enjoy being part of, then our character is

defined as someone worth watching and rooting for. If we then take the audience to a point of crisis, where in order to make the shimmering point of magic occur we must invest effort into resolving a conflict, then their understanding of our intriguing skills will only enhance the drama. The opposite view of this is to say that such things as card flourishes have no place in magic, for displays of skill are not compatible with magic being real and independent of the performer's technique. But this is a flawed argument. To pretend that we are not utilising skill is daft and patronising, and to display it to just the right degree to define our characters (or in another way, to gain credibility early on), makes for more resonant relations with the audience.

The magician who does ask himself the question of exactly what response does he wish his performance to elicit from the group - and continues to refine his answers - will perform in a way that is borne from an appreciation of the spectators' experience of an art-form. In that he realises that magic is all about the experience of the spectator and is as far removed from technique and sleight-of-hand as music is from fingering notation on a score, he will be set in the direction of efficiently creating powerful magic, if he has the skills and sensitivities of a composer of magic to back up his intent.

In forming the vision, it is also vital to ensure that it develops from the right perspective. As you think about your performance, and allow that vision to form, it is important to note that the mental image is of you performing for a group in whatever surroundings. If when you think of performance, you see what you would see out of your own eyes, then you are seeing what you do from the wrong perspective. You must be sure that you view yourself when you think about what you do. Partly from the perspective of the audience, and also from the perspective of an imaginary third party, so that you can see the interaction and dynamic between you and the spectators clearly. If you are not

used to this, then it will take you by surprise. Seeing everything about yourself - your looks, your dress, your manner and body-language, the effects you perform - all from the perspective of how they actually come across rather than how they feel to you is vital as a performer. A performer who cannot view or criticise himself from these external perspectives probably has no business performing professionally.

As I have said, I don't believe that there are any shortcuts for arriving at a vision of how your magic must be. Indeed, it would make no sense for there to be one, for the vision will change as you grow, expanding and developing your ideas. But I think it to be the case that having some idea of what you believe magic to be about is important at any stage. This book is about what I have currently decided magic means to me, which I must treat as if it were absolutely what magic is. But along the way I must remind you that these things are merely my opinion and far from fact - for, as we have discussed, magic is not inherently anything. So if you do not agree with my vision, I hope that means that you have formed one for yourself.

Derren Brown
Absolute Magic
2001

FINAL WORDS

JOSHUA JAY

"HE WHO WONDERS DISCOVERS THAT THIS IS
IN ITSELF A WONDER."

-M.C. ESCHER

The magician's loftiest goal—the dream we sleep to each night—is to demonstrate art in our magic. But as this collection demonstrates, we cannot even agree on what magic is, or what makes magic strong or interesting or art.

So how are we to know if we have succeeded?

Does it matter?

I have come to believe that attaining art with magic matters not at all. What matters is the search for art in our magic. This is the worthiest quest, and in that search we often find the art that we seek.

Art critic Michael Kimmelman writes, "A life lived with art in mind might itself be a kind of art." It stands to reason, then, that a life lived with magic in mind might itself be a kind of magic.

With every hour you practice, with every day you perform, with every trick you invent, with every book you read, with every spectator you amaze, and with every spectator you fail to amaze, you come closer to real magic. You look back: hours, performances, inventions, books, spectators. You look forward: more hours, performances, inventions, books, spectators. You are living with magic in mind.



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