

A close-up, high-angle portrait of a man with light skin, green eyes, and a goatee. He is wearing black-rimmed glasses and a black cap. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows on his face. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Jay  
Sankey

BEYOND  
SECRETS

Foreword by Jon Racherbaumer

**BEYOND SECRETS**  
**By Jay Sankey**

**“Strip away illusion. Retain the mystery.”**

**- Philip Toshio Sudo**

**To Lisa**  
**My dearest friend and darling wife**

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# FOREWORD

**Jon Racherbaumer**

*"Hey," I said. "When you, do you sort of make it up, or is it just, you know, like what happens." - Martin Amis, Money (1984)*

In a jokey sense, Canada is not known for spawning anything particularly remarkable. But, to me, the opposite is true. Some of my favorite writers--"favorite" because of how much they stimulate me--are Canadian. Canada has also spawned some of magicdom's most interesting and mind-tweaking magicians and creators.

The author of the book you are about to browse, buy, borrow, read, or sample is my favorite Canadian rebel angel.

Jay Sankey, the existential jock of jocularity who put the "imp" in "impossible" only seems like a runaway whack-job. Do I exaggerate? Yes and no...If you pay attention and survive, his "fine madness" comes through.

Besides, trying to explain or summarize what Sankey has been, what he may be, and what is likely to become is like trying to explain a rainbow to a cat.

We know that he performs, creates, writes, draws cartoons, and calls himself an "odd little man." However, he resists categorization.

If cornered-which is hard because he avoids corners-he'll tell you that he wants more than anything to energize your "heart and mind." When he writes, he wants you to think for yourself; to free up positive feelings.

Not long ago I wrote this about Sankey: "The fit-to be-tied King of Original Fits gets antsy around people who color inside lines, put things in boxes, and collect tidy categories.

He gets also antsy around complacency, clichés, and predictability. His approach instead is to immerse himself (almost to the point of drowning) in the swirling flow of his own stream-of-consciousness, and then make everything he does a form of irrepressible, uncensored performance art. Like Wally Whitman, he seeks cosmic yawps.

Writing books is another matter. Putting words on paper, alas, is inescapably about form. There are lots of words, sentences, and paragraphs. There are-oh, No!-categories, representations, definitions, and rules. There are restrictions, and the deeper you delve, the deeper it gets.

The good news is that Sankey's books (in theory) about theory and practice remind me of another Canadian: Marshall McLuhan. Pascal had his *Pensées*. McLuhan had his probes. Sankey, like McLuhan, puts out probes. He wants to penetrate, prick and probe your consciousness.

Then he dances off the last page. At that abrupt point, you must carry on where he left off. Granted: He will have had much to babble about regarding his adventures on both sides of the Looking Glass. But he would also caution you that his words (in all their zippity-doo-da splendor) are only a kind of mapping, not be confused with the actual territory.

If you have seen Jay perform or lecture, you know he casts that spell. This work is both skeletal and fleshy. As you experience it (Note that I did not say "read"), remember the physicality of his live performances. This book is a different kind of performance.

Yet you will discover lots of fitful and fanciful acting and reacting, lots of pacing and protestation, lots of stopping, starting, turning, jumping, and jabbing. In the process, he will disarm you by openly and tacitly showing that writing, like a live performance, boils down to two things: you and him.

And as he often confesses, you, the reader, the spectator, have all the power. Not him. All he has are the tricks of his trade, the playfulness of his patter, the evocativeness of his prose, and his ability to orchestrate what is likely to happen as it happens.

If he can stay two or three beats ahead of the "flow" and ahead of your capacity to perceive what he perceives before you do, then you will giggle, guffaw, or experience illumination. In this work, Sankey literally brings you up to speed-your speed and his speed.

Jay understands that spectators and readers only invest time and emotions in things, people, and books they care about. Therefore, when he performs a trick, does something comedic, draws a cartoon, or writes a book, he is mindful of you.

This is the "magic" of this book...because it will ultimately be about you. Jay wants you to care about the things, ideas, and theories he has written about. So...as you experience this book, drop your defenses, pretenses, and presumptions.

Let Jay relentlessly and teasingly "probe" you to get involved, to be helplessly and happily part of his "world"-a parallel universe he wants you to love as much as he loved making it. Be ready. Be open. Let it happen. Soon the balls, every damn one of them, will be in your court and you will have a helluva time playing with them.

July 13, 2003 New Orleans, Louisiana

## PREFACE

*"You see things; and say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say, 'Why not?'" – George Bernard Shaw*

I am primarily a close-up magician. Though I have performed hundreds of children's shows, spent more than a few days as a street magician, dabbled in mentalism and performed as a professional stand-up comic on the stages of countless comedy clubs, my forte and venue of choice is performing sleight-of-hand magic for intimate audiences.

Over the last twenty-eight years I have performed my close-up magic at restaurants, bars, house parties, trade shows, product launches, business meetings, cocktail parties and resorts all over the world.

I have also performed and lectured at magician's conventions and clubs in over a dozen different countries. I tell you all this, not in the hope of impressing you, but rather to give you some idea of the experiences out of which my views, preferences and prejudices have been born.

I am keenly aware of the subjectivity and profound limitations of my own perspective (though that awareness in no way prevents me from nonetheless reveling and even rejoicing in that perspective).

On the other hand, I have passionately attempted to not limit my words strictly to my own experience, but rather to write with one eye on my own work and the other eye on a wide range of imaginings of what I think and feel magic could be and perhaps even should be (as a result, some readers will undoubtedly criticize this book as being cross-eyed).

Some passages are especially critical of certain attitudes, trends and approaches towards magic. I am keenly aware that my own work is not exempt from the shortcomings of these very same attitudes.

In fact, I believe it is precisely because of their subtle presence in my own work that I criticize them with such passion.

This is an unabashedly ambitious book and explores such seminal questions as, "How can you express your creativity through magic?" "How can you emotionally engage your audience?" "How can your work be honest?" and "How can you refine your skills?"

The answers I offer are mine. Perhaps they will in some way assist you in finding yours.

Jay Sankey Toronto, Canada September, 2003

## A DANCE OF GLANCES

*"I see you see me." Jean-Paul Sartre*

I love the intimacy of close-up magic and especially the challenging work of maintaining a variety of relationships with several people at the same time. This maintenance is achieved in many ways, though ultimately much of it comes down to sight, sound and touch. Glances, words and physical contact.

Of course, very few routines are constructed in such a way that you touch every member of the audience (without going to jail). Though you can direct your comments towards a single member of the crowd, your words are usually heard by everyone present. Which is why, to first initiate and then develop different relationships with the individual personalities making up your audience, glances can often be the most effective means.

You glance at a spectator; then shift your glance to a second spectator, and as your glance shifts, the first spectator glances at a third spectator.

And so it goes, everyone ceaselessly "checking in" with each other even as you all take part in the group activity of creating the magic effect.

A glance takes but a moment to deliver and receive, and in that moment an incredible amount of information and feeling can be conveyed. At the same time, glances can be completely private, even while surrounded by other people.

And unlike words said above a whisper, every glance can be sublimely tailored to the moment and recipient.

As the above Sartre quote suggests, even a fleeting glance directly into the eyes of another human being is a multi-layered event analogous to two mirrors suddenly turned to face each other, creating an opportunity for an almost infinite interplay.

Looking into the eyes of a member of the audience, I see them just as surely as they see me. And they see that I see them. And I see that they see me. And so on.

During a performance of close-up magic, I am forever shifting my gaze from participant to participant, and as the show unfolds, these glances acquire a history, even a familiarity. As a result, we begin to see each other in a richer, more individual light.

When I look into someone's eyes, it is as if I have just dropped a penny into a well with no idea of how far it may fall. Sometimes I discover the well is frozen and the penny's descent is stopped dead. More often, the waters are more receptive. And quite regularly, the coin falls deeper than I can gauge.

My job as a performing artist is to follow the coin and make the most of wherever it lands. Words and touch are undoubtedly transcendent tools, but when it comes to nurturing unique, individual relationships in a close-up magic setting, the eyes definitely have it.

## IS MAGIC AN ART?

*"I think you get the most interesting work done in fields where people don't feel they're doing art, but are merely practicing a craft." Douglas Adams*

This perennial question is a lot like asking, "Is painting an art?" My answer is, "It can be." Like a pack of playing cards or a few rubber bands, neither paint nor canvas is inherently "artistic."

Just as with painting, with magic too the question of whether or not it is artistic comes down to the work of the individual practitioner. Instead of the tired question, "Is magic an art?" I believe the question "Can magic be artistic?" speaks more to the point.

Naturally, before we can explore the possible relationships between two ideas we would do well to first define both. In this instance, by the word "magic" I mean a performance of magic and by "artistic" I mean (and here is precisely when, all too often, a tiny black car pulls up, the passenger door opens and a stream of smirking clowns pours out) an individual is able to express something about his or her unique point of view on the world through the medium.

When the practitioner is able to do this, I consider him or her an "artist" and their work as "artistic." In this way, I use the word "artistic" as a completely non-evaluative term.

For me, whether or not I enjoy or am able to appreciate certain work in no way determines my use of the word, "art." If the work is self-expressive, it is art.



Consequently, my answer to the question of, "Is magic an art?" is quite simple. When the magician expresses him or herself through their performance, it is art.

On the other hand, when the magician performs effects and handlings created by others, accompanied by scripts largely copied from other sources with a character lacking any real creativity, the fellow is not an "artist" nor his work "artistic," as entertaining as it may well be.

## BEGIN BY CONNECTING

*"Always be inviting the audience into your theatre." – Sanford Meisner*

Instead of waiting for your audience to extend their attention and energy to you, extend yourself to them. "Go to them," but not in a pushy or controlling way. Ideally, offer yourself to them in the hope of connecting to them, as they are, in that moment.

First establish this connection before attempting to guide your audience in a direction. Too many performers, in their enthusiasm (and their underlying insecurity) start their shows with a rush of energy and run the risk of leaving their audiences behind, sitting there in their seats watching the jet take off without them.

Of course, energy, especially at the start of a performance is always a good idea, but put that energy into connecting. It only takes a few moments to establish a solid connection. Once done, you will find your audience far more receptive to getting on your jet.

Your eyes are of course one of the most effective ways to establish this all-important connection. When performing close-up, take a moment to look everyone in the eyes and send a friendly message of, "Hello. It is very nice to meet you. I am glad you are here."

Performing onstage in front of eight hundred people is another matter. In such a case, be sure to take the entire audience into your introductory gaze by slowly turning your head from one side of the audience to the other.

I also think it is worth taking a moment or two to silently greet the handful of people you can actually see in the first few rows. Make the most of the fact that you can see them and that they can see that you can see them.

A little smile or a friendly nod is all it takes. It is equally important to send your energy to the very back of the theatre because they are the ones most likely to feel distanced from the experience.

## THE MYTH OF SPEED

*"The hand is quicker than the eye." - Traditional Expression*

Few phrases have done more harm to the art of magic than the one cited above. Ironically, even as it refers to sight, the implications of the expression have powerfully blinded both magicians and the lay public.

In the minds of the general public, it perpetuates the grossly belittling generalization that when all is said and done, the art of magic comes down to fast hands, while in the minds of sleight-of-hand students it suggests that speed is a magician's ally.

The reality is that speed is more often an enemy of the illusion than a friend. Few things will ever draw attention to a sleight and spark suspicion more consistently than a fast execution.

Actually, speed does harm to almost every aspect of our craft, from quickly performed sleights and hurriedly delivered lines of script to a rushed first climax or even a sudden, forced change of facial expression.

Speed usually requires a burst of energy that in most contexts only serves to break the spell, inspire suspicion and snap the gentle thread connecting the performer and audience. Speed also often leads to confusion or creates the impression that the performer is anxious.

However, as usual there are exceptions. For example, when I execute the Classic Pass or Marlo's "In Lieu of the Through the Fist Move," (sometimes referred to as "The Twirl Change") I employ a burst of speed.

But in each case, these small, fast movements are concealed within a larger action like a cloth thrown over a birdcage to quiet the occupant's song.

I can still remember the night, after I had been performing stand-up comedy for only a year or two, when a much more seasoned comic took me aside and gently suggested that I try doing my act, not just a little slower, but at half the speed.

I was extremely skeptical and immediately imagined strained, excruciating silences, but I agreed to try it. Not surprisingly, it was very difficult for me to do and it felt more than a little unnatural, even disorienting. But after a half-dozen more shows, I had to admit, performing at a slower pace yielded stronger audience reaction.

Slow down your thoughts, hands and words. Relax. Take a deep breath and hold it for several beats. Then slowly let it out. Perform your magic slowly and steadily.

How else do you expect your audience to have the opportunity to fully experience and appreciate it? And given that the audience's visual experience of an effect makes up a large part of their understanding, handle your props and execute your moves so that your hands, rather than being quicker than their eyes are much slower than their eyes.

All too often, when the hand is quicker than the eye, the wonder is lost.

## INCOMPREHENSIBILITY

*"No object is mysterious. The mystery is your eye." - Elizabeth Bowen*

A lack of understanding does not necessarily create a sense of mystery. A confusing magic effect is a perfect example of this (though "a confused magic effect" may be a more accurate phrase because there are far fewer inherently confusing effects than there are confusing ways of presenting effects).

If you share an effect with your audience and unintentionally lose them somewhere along the way, perhaps because you raced through an important part or neglected to clarify an initial condition, at the end of the routine the audience will fail to grasp the overall effect.

This lack of understanding will create confusion and possibly frustration, but not a sense of mystery. Paradoxically, mystery requires clarity, even a certainty as to the events surrounding the mystery.

## MAGIC AS BLOOD SPORT

*"The camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own." – Susan Sontag*

There is something fascist about the present zeal for "freaking people out." While magicians once strived to charm, delight, seduce and entertain, there is now a generation of magicians who seem intent solely on "frying" or "destroying" people. It is as if for these performers, there is no kind of movie other than action flicks. Gone are the dramas, romances and comedies.

Not surprisingly, this narrow-minded lust for screams, shouts and other overt signs of mental meltdown is a direct result of the television culture and in particular the manner in which many of the "street magic" shows are now produced.

Turning the camera from the magician to the astonished spectator, from the doer to the done-to, is an inspired technique and brings a whole new drama and vitality to televised magic.

But as is typical with that medium, these shows feature only the most obvious reactions. People who are "merely" amused, charmed, befuddled, delighted, disconcerted and even silently awed do not "make for good television." And so we are left with little more than gladiator demonstrations. Very emotional folks screaming, shouting, swearing and, in general, "freakin' out for the camera." And that is precisely the problem.

The camera has become as integral to the magician's tool kit as the thumb tip, pack of cards or magic marker. The camera has become a coaxing device, an intensifier, a magnifying glass, a cheerleader and in many television productions in the last few years, even the magician's confederate.

Thanks to the wonders of editing, not only do such shows feature a wide variety of the usual unoriginal camera tricks, they now also routinely cut away to spectators responding to entirely different effects than the ones we are watching at home.

Such editing reduces these "live shows" to porn videos where every performer possesses Herculean stamina and every spectator reaches an astonishing level of pleasure each and every time out.

Actually, I wish "pleasure" was the right word. But these magicians have little interest in pleasing the members of their point blank audiences. They only want to destroy them. To push them to a point where they do or say something that makes for good television.

Nothing more than test subjects, they are not performed for, but rather, are subjected to. In a sense, savaged, even raped. There is nothing gentle, subtle or poetic about it, and certainly nothing original.

Magic has attracted the insecure seeking power over others since the beginning of time. When they look at their audience, these performers do not see people. They see blank canvases. There is no tickling, charming or massaging. There is only the jugular.

Focused strictly on "freaking people out," these magi reduce their subjects to objects, to recipients on display. And of course, at the same time reduce their craft to a myopic addiction, to a single, artless act. The sad irony is that, rather than embodying power, these little conjurors give all their power away. To what? To the camera.



## ORCHESTRATING FOCUS

*"The relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled." – John Berger*

Here are nine principles regarding the audience's visual experience of a performance of magic.

First, during the performance of an effect the audience is always looking somewhere.

Second, each spectator sees/ gathers a series of images during the effect.

Third, spectators often gather slightly or even starkly different images depending on a wide range of variables including seating position, mental concentration, emotional involvement, etc.

Fourth, each spectator's collection of highly subjective images make-up the raw visual ingredients of their ultimately unique experience of the effect.

Fifth, there are six primary areas of audience focus: the performer's face, his right hand, his left hand, the props, the face(s) of any participants and the hands of the participants.

When the magician is holding a prop (rather than placing it on the table) or when both of his hands are within a few inches of each other, the separateness of the spheres vanishes and a single sphere of focus is shared.

Sixth, the performer's focus, though not absolutely controlling the audience's, powerfully guides it.

Seventh, to aid in this guiding, the experienced performer will employ his eyes, the direction and angle of his head, his hands, words and props.

Eighth, the odds of the audience's focus shifting from a sphere of attention are in direct proportion to the length of time nothing of interest has happened in that area.

With this in mind, it is often wise to guide the audience to focus on a sphere of attention a moment before you desire them to not be looking there. Just prior to executing a Classic Pass, I use my eyes, the angle of my head and the position of my hands to draw the audience's attention to the deck, usually as I am squaring the cards.

This dramatically increases the odds of the audience looking up into my face when, a moment later, I lower my hands, straighten my shoulders and look the spectators in the eyes.

Ninth, it is far more effective to guide the audience's focus towards something rather than away from something.

## WHAT IS YOUR MARKET?

*"Nature never deceives us; it is always we who deceive ourselves." – Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

Are you elegant? Funny? Mysterious? Sexy? Fast-talking? Many magicians get distracted by their fantasies and never take a long, serious look in the mirror. Sadly, this only undermines their ability to make at least some of their most cherished fantasies a reality.

Who you are and your particular performance style should play a large part in determining your target market. Corporate clients are looking for one thing, parents of children celebrating a birthday are looking for another, and the owner of a bar/restaurant is looking for yet another.

I suggest you specialize rather than trying to be a "jack of all trades" because being very good at just one thing is challenge enough.

However, I realize that many magicians choose to try their hand at a variety of performance situations, so allow me to suggest that you at least develop a different promotional package for each of the venues.

Think about it. You own a restaurant, a guy comes in claiming to be a magician and when he gives you his card it reads, "Parties, banquets, trade shows, restaurants, anniversaries, bar mitzvahs and funerals."

Now imagine meeting a magician who hands you his card and it reads, "Restaurant Magician." Who are you going to be tempted to interview first? And who is going to be able to ask for more money? That's right. The specialist.

Magicians claim that they have to work at birthday parties, restaurants, office parties, banquets and a dozen other venues "to make ends meet," but in my experience, spreading yourself so thinly across so many markets is a great way to guarantee that you will be struggling to make ends meet for years to come.

There's an old show biz adage, "Grab one bell and ring it until your arm falls off." It takes years to establish yourself in a market and typically just when you are beginning to get completely bored with a market is when that market "suddenly" takes notice of you and your services are in great demand.

Be patient. Look at yourself in the mirror, check in with your heart and decide which market you suit and enjoy performing in. Then commit to it and promote yourself with everything you have. I bet you will be thrilled with the results. The universe responds to commitment.

## POPULAR MISPERCEPTIONS

*"One should respect public opinion in so far as it is necessary to avoid starvation and to keep out of prison, but anything that goes beyond this is voluntary submission to an unnecessary tyranny." – Bertrand Russell*

Based on my experience with audience members, restaurant owners, booking agents, club managers, television producers, book publishers, talk show hosts and corporate clients it is safe to say that many people perceive magic as something primarily performed for children.

People also tend to think of magicians as tricksters who deliberately challenge and embarrass their audiences, and magic as a collection of gimmicked props and quick moves that "probably take some practice."

I am not sure how you feel about such narrow and ignorant perceptions, but I find them sad and upsetting. Such misinformed views dwarf the general public's expectations and limit their receptivity to magic while also dramatically reducing the performance and employment opportunities of every magician on the planet.

This in turn profoundly limits our opportunities to polish our skills, develop our craft and grow as artists. But the negative impact of this belittling attitude towards magic does not stop there.

Though I am an ardent believer in listening to your audience and being guided by their feedback, these popular prejudices also seriously impede the ability of our audiences to be understanding participants and trustworthy critics.

Consequently, talented, skilled and original magicians regularly lose work to cut-rate magicians who stop by their local magic shop to pick up their new closing effect on the way to the gig.

I am reminded of a powerful scene from the movie *Malcolm X* (1992). In the scene, Malcolm (played by Denzel Washington) gestures towards a glass of dirty-looking water and comments upon the fact that if dirty water is the only thing people have, they will drink it.

Then as he pours a glass of clean and sparkling water, he adds, "But if given a choice, people will always drink clean water over dirty water."

I am not for a moment suggesting that the general public is incapable of distinguishing between an enlightened performer and one who is inept and without personal style. Nor am I making the ridiculous claim that people are unable to figure out for themselves what they do and do not enjoy.

All I am saying is that, given the widespread misconceptions about magic and magicians, if people happen to cross paths with a bumbling hack carrying a fishing box filled with tricks still in their magic shop packages, it is hardly surprising if the audience jumps to the conclusion, "most magicians are like that."

This wide array of erroneous views on magic and magicians impacts where we perform, how often we perform, who we perform for and how much we are paid.

But in the final analysis, perhaps the most insidious outcome of this all too common myopia is that it cannot help but have a negative influence on our own perceptions of what we are as magicians, and what we are doing when we perform "magic."

## THE ANATOMY OF AN EFFECT

*"Man is a history-making creature who can neither repeat his past nor leave it behind." W.H. Auden*

Much like a joke consists of a set-up and a punch line, every magic effect, no matter how simple, has a set-up and an outcome.

Set-up: a card is selected, returned to the pack and the deck is shuffled. Outcome: The magician slowly removes the selected card from his pocket.

Set-up: two coins are placed in the spectator's hand and one in the magician's hand. Outcome: The magician's hands are empty and all three coins are found in the spectator's hand.

Even when the outcome is arrived at with few words or actions, there are invariably elements that make for an implicit set-up.

For example, if you walk up to a table and, without saying a word, wave your hand over someone's fork and cause it to move a few inches without actually touching it, the set-up is: an ordinary fork is lying on the table (in a situation where gravity is doing its usual thing) and the magician waves his hand over the fork.

Outcome: the fork mysteriously moves.

As magicians, we often forget that even though our suggestive waves of the hand and dramatic finger snaps have nothing to do with the method, for the outcome to appear to have "come out" of the set-up, we must communicate a narrative tying the set-up to the outcome.

## INTIMATE SCRIPTS

*"The script is the actor's greatest enemy." - Sanford Meisner*

*"Using words to describe magic is like using a screwdriver to cut roast beef." – Tom Robbins*

Generally speaking, magicians tend to either under script or over script their effects by either presenting purely descriptive script (which, given its lack of creativity and vitality is rightly called "patter") or by feeling they must have a complete story with a beginning, middle and end.

Every effect should have a beginning, middle and end, but this theatrical axiom can actually be accomplished with six well-chosen words or even silence.

By "story," all I am talking about is an implicit narrative that brings meaning and purpose to the proceedings.

You do not have to talk about "three princesses and two kings" or "the boy who sold a chair at the market" or "the magical healing powers of reptilian love" just to make a thimble vanish and appear behind your ear.

Rather than being organic, such presentations often have a pretentious and artificial feel. Keep it simple, keep it brief, and most importantly, keep it real.

Real for who? For you.

Assuming you perform close-up magic, I suggest you approach your audience with the idea that you possess only half the script.



Nurturing a lively and spontaneous exchange is one of the surest ways to encourage your audience to invest emotionally in the proceedings, and the degree to which they invest emotionally is precisely the degree to which they will care, be amazed and remember.

I think of my own short, humorous scripts as arrows resting loosely in a quiver rather than clay bricks firmly cemented together.

My goal is not to present a series of clever sentences, but rather to connect with my audience. That is the goal, and I am interested in speaking only to that end.

Words, however, have as much potential to separate people as they do to connect them, which is precisely why I like to keep my scripting loose.

I typically have four or five key phrases per routine, including opening lines (or "in lines"), closing lines (or "out" lines), instructional lines and "selling the magic" lines.

I also have a collection of random lines ranging from the funny and odd to the insightful and even confessional, and I toss these lines into the mix on impulse.

Many of these lines I have been using for so long that I no longer consciously choose them in a moment. I just find myself saying them.

There are three different kinds of scripting: functional, informational and emotional. "Would you please hold this coin," is an example of functional scripting. "You'll notice that every card is different," is an example of informational.

And, "I found this coin lying on the sidewalk less than twenty feet from the Eiffel tower," is an example of emotional.

All three are necessary for a well-rounded and effective script, though I view the functional and emotional to be of greatest importance because if your audience is not clear about what you want them to do, or they do not care about the proceedings, creating a successful effect is going to be extremely difficult.

Think of the effect as a boat and the audience's concern as people in the boat. Without the boat there is nothing to carry the people, and without the people all you have an empty boat.

## WHAT IS THE METHOD?

*"Everything that deceives may be said to enchant." - Plato*

In response to the above question you might reply, "I palmed the card," or "I caused them to laugh at the right moment," or "I inspired belief," or even, "Twenty-five years of performing experience."

Each of these answers reflects a different part of the reality of the overall method, i.e. the means through which an effect is created in the minds of the audience.

Generally speaking, magicians possess an unfortunately myopic view of method and all too often fail to give themselves enough credit for the magic moments they midwife into the world.

Ultimately, the question of method involves a myriad of techniques and crafts intertwined with each other. After all, what good is a perfect pass if you lack the confidence to convincingly deliver a single line of script?

And what is the value of an ingeniously structured routine if audiences tend to find you unlikable?

Manual technique, acting, writing and a great deal more are involved in every moment of a show. These are the true methods behind the magic.

Of course, most magicians would immediately agree, and yet when discussing "the method behind a trick," this same majority of magicians have in mind only the physical mechanics of the routine, e.g. thumb tip, thread, shell coin, etc.

This child-like fascination with the clever gimmicks of our craft only serves to distract us from the great many other elements involved in creating a moment of magic, elements which are not only equally fascinating, but which are also far more powerful and fundamental than any "bright and shiny" gimmick could ever be.

This narrow view of method as gimmicks or even as sleights combined with gimmicks reduces our craft in every way imaginable and is one of the most destructive tendencies in modern magic.

## IF I WERE A REAL MAGICIAN

*"Train yourself for a profession that does not exist. That is the mark of an artist- to create something which previously existed only in his or her heart." – David Mamet*

When developing an effect, I often ask myself, "How would it look if I were a real magician?" It is precisely this interior dialogue that makes the refining of the effect "creative" in that it requires me to commune with my imagining of what real magic looks like.

No two magicians have quite the same vision of "real magic," which means that not only can we learn a great deal from each other, but also that each of us is responsible for creating the unique magic that is ours alone.

For me, a real magician does not perform effects that are difficult for the audience to understand. The effects of a real magician require no explanation.

The magic is self-evident. A real magician does not present tedious scripts or execute suspicious movements. A real magician also never tries to prove anything because the proof is unnecessary.

He or she possesses a gentle focus and confidence and performs every effect as if it is his first and last. The real magician is fully present, spontaneous and relaxed. Most of all, he does what he does in a spirit of sharing, not in a spirit of ego and demonstration.

For me, the musing, "If I were a real magician . . ." is a kind of hope and prayer, like the wooden boy who dreamed of becoming a real boy.

Like many who practice and love the art of magic, I suspect that on some level I imagine that, if I act like a real magician, perhaps one day I just might become one.

But I will let you in on a little secret. During a performance, in those moments when you feel completely alive and, not so much in control, but perfectly in touch with your performance and your audience, you are not acting like a real magician.

Miraculously, you are one. Trust that and follow your heart to your own magic, the magic that is real for you.

## A LITTLE EXPERIMENT

*“Acting is a masochistic form of exhibitionism. It is not quite the occupation of an adult.” – Laurence Olivier*

What does it mean to bring feeling to an effect? Does it mean to weep as you demonstrate your Faro Shuffle? Laugh hysterically as you push a lit cigarette into your fist? Or moan with sexual pleasure as you cause the Four of Clubs to rise to the top of the pack again and again?

Though I am a completely untrained actor, I am going to hazard a guess and say, no. Such large expressions of emotion, if authentic, would certainly make for memorable moments, but they are not necessary in order to inspire an audience to feel.

The performer however, must feel something about what he or she is doing and this feeling must in some way be communicated to the audience.

With that in mind, let us try a little experiment. Grab a pack of cards and execute a Double Lift. What do you feel? My guess is, not much. Not surprising, considering it is a sleight you have done a zillion times.

But now, I would like you to try to imagine how you might execute the move if you were feeling really sad about something.

To acquire some emotional fuel for the experiment, take a moment to imagine a sad event, either something that has happened in your life or something you can vividly imagine happening.

Spend a few moments visualizing the sad event and when you sense that you are in touch with whatever feelings come up, try to express some emotion through the execution of a Double Lift.

Or rather, do not so much "try to express" but instead stay in touch with those feelings as you execute the move.

Of course, accessing emotional fuel while executing a sleight is probably going to be a lot more difficult than while delivering an especially moving line of script or interacting with your audience, but I wanted to suggest an experiment you could try right now, just on your own.

For much more exciting and satisfying results, I suggest you try performing one of your favorite effects for several different audiences and each time try to perform it while being in touch with different feelings. Try an "angry version," a "sad version," a "joyous version," and more.

If these experiments feel more than a little contrived, don't be surprised because the themes and scripts of your effects are probably pretty lame emotional vehicles.

Real actors usually explore/express their emotions through scripts rich in emotion while playing characters who find themselves in emotionally charged situations playing off an entire cast of emotionally expressive characters! This is very different from your typical "Copper/Silver/Brass" routine.

But does that mean we cannot have feelings about our effects or even script our routines so that they are more emotionally engaging for both our audiences and for ourselves? I think not. In fact, I think that should be our ultimate goal.



And as we come to feel more about what we do, and express those feelings, our audiences will respond emotionally in turn. A far cry from mere "fun and games."

To learn more about the art of acting, I urge you to read *Sanford Meisner On Acting*. It makes for a marvelous introduction.

After that, you might want to consider reading one of the bibles of modern acting, *The Actor Prepares* by Constantine Stanislavski.

## KEY IMAGES

*"In our culture, sight has become a kind of life-preserver used to make sense of the world around us." Mary Carole McCauley*

Living in a visually obsessed society, it is no surprise that one of the most effective ways to inspire belief is by means of a handful of key images.

Here are five images by way of example:

*One, the magician's hands, empty.*

*Two, the magician's hands holding a five dollar bill.*

*Three, the magician's hands folding the five dollar bill into a small packet.*

*Four, the magician's hands unfolding the small packet. It is now a ten dollar bill.*

*Five, both sides of the ten dollar bill are shown (the magician's hands are still empty).*

A series of key images presented in a particular order which, when considered in their entirety coax an interpretation of the events as "impossible." Magic. Note that each of the five images is equally important.

If you remove any one of them, the illusion is greatly reduced. Just as the audience needs to clearly see the original bill and the final bill, so too do they need to see both sides of the bills and your empty hands.

In a sense, we present our audiences with a series of mathematical figures and their minds do the final tallying with some spectators arriving at one total, some at another.

If you watch the audience very carefully, you will sometimes actually see the shocked spectators blink their eyes several times at the climax of an effect as if they are struggling to process not just what they see, but more to the point, what they just saw.

Quickly flipping through the handful of mental photographs they "took" over the last few moments, they arrive at a very personal conclusion.

Every effect in your repertoire should be able to be reduced to just a few key images and it is on these that you must focus. Think of yourself as the driver of a tour bus.

Much of the scenery is viewed from inside the moving bus as it moves along down the road, but for the especially noteworthy scenes, you stop the bus and let the people spend a few moments outside.

In other words, during your presentation of the key images, be sure to stop and give these scenes a chance to powerfully register with the audience.

## LEARNING A SLEIGHT

*"Beginnings are important because all else follows from them." – Frank Herbert*

Before practicing a sleight, it is essential to first intellectually understand it. Then, as you practice the move you will develop a physical understanding, and as that comprehension deepens over time, the move will become yours in a way it has never been for any other magician.

But the mind must first establish a relationship with the move, often by being introduced to the move through a book, video, lecture or fellow performer.

If you encounter the technique while reading a book, I strongly advise you to read the entire description two or three times before even picking up your deck or coin or whatever. Then slowly and cautiously walk through the move.

Do not attempt to actually execute it yet! This is exactly how bad habits are first picked up, when the clay is still soft. Yearning for an imagined gracefulness and urged on by the amateur's thirst for speed, far too many magicians try to run before they can walk.

When first learning a move, gently familiarize yourself with it like a dog sniffing around a tree. Make sure you have the broad strokes firmly in place before you even think about fine-tuning.

Actually, your hands will do much of the fine-tuning for you, organically over time, shaping the sleight to suit themselves, and it is precisely because your awareness will often play an ever decreasing role in the evolution of the sleight, that you must make the very most of the early learning stages.

In a sense, before the sleight has a life of its own. Like the foundations of a building, if they are even a tiny bit askew, no matter how perfectly the rest of the structure is constructed, the building will still lean dangerously to one side.

## AN ACTOR PLAYING THE PART

*"Acting is merely the art of keeping a large group of people from coughing." – Ralph Richardson*

Robert Houdin claimed that a magician is, "an actor playing the part of a magician." Perhaps this was true in his day, but more recently, many magicians appear to be extremely limited actors playing the parts of tragically outdated, clichéd characters with the emotional range of sex trade professionals.

In even the smallest of roles, most film, theatre and television actors play their parts with a range of emotions, displaying anger, envy, fear, joy, lust, amusement and more.

As for us magicians, well, Houdin's quote embodies a nice idea, but the reality is that precious few professional magicians have the aspirations, let alone the skill, of even a competent amateur theatrical actor.

As for my own performances, though I work hard to be my true, authentic and spontaneous self while in front of an audience, I too stick closely to the same tiny handful of emotions expressed by most of my fellow practitioners.

I voice my sincere criticisms and frustrations not to insult, but in the hopes of inspiring even a single reader to take more emotional risks when performing.

Until we take more risks as performers, we cannot hope for our audiences to think of us as legitimate actors.

## WONDER WITHOUT SECRECY

*"The purpose of the play is to bring to the stage the life of the soul." -David Mamet*

Wonder is an extremely personal experience, resulting from a resonance between what lies at the core of the individual and a rare truth revealed.

Many people experience a sense of wonder in the presence of a Michelangelo sculpture, others feel wonder during the final climactic scene of a brilliant film, and still others experience wonder while watching a world-class athlete at the top of his or her game.

In such moments we feel the special combination of thrill and mystery that defines wonder, yet there are no secrets being purposely kept.

In fact, a large part of the power of these experiences is that they are not presented with an eye towards the question, "How is this accomplished?"

However, given the nature of the human mind (especially the analytical Western mind) the question, "How?" perennially rises like so much smoke from the flames of the wondrous experience.

How can that artist create such beauty? How can that film trigger such an exhilarating series of emotions? How can that athlete achieve such mastery?

It is important to note that wonder (as opposed to mere puzzlement) raises questions of relationships, not mere mechanics and methodology.

Wonder does not inspire the question, "How did the artist carve such an aquiline nose out of granite?"

Instead, wonder raises the question about the astonishingly intimate relationship between the artist and beauty.

Even when witnessing something as concrete as a basketball player sinking the ball into the basket from fifty feet away, the soul's question is not so much, "How did he do it?" but "How can his relationship to the court, the ball, the net and the other players be so intimate, so free?"

Little surprise, stellar basketball players are commonly referred to as "wizards."



## CREATING MAGIC

*"The history of art is the history of revivals." – Samuel Butler*

When I create magic, I begin the process at a variety of "places." One place is with a move that has caught my imagination, a sleight which on some level I sense has exciting potential.

In such cases, I focus on the move and strive to perceive it in the abstract and apart from any specific (and limiting) applications.

Take for example, Edward Marlo's "In Lieu of the Through the Fist Move," also known as the "Twirl Change." What exactly is the essence of this move? Two playing cards, held back to back as one, are secretly spun 180 degrees undercover of a brief shaking action to affect the change of one card into another? Wrong.

The move can be performed with more than two cards, even half a deck. The move can be done with many other objects other than playing cards, including business cards, beer coasters and matchbooks.

You can also execute the move to bring about effects other than an overt color change (such as the secret switching of one or more cards).

The true essence of the move is the exchanging of a surface, either secretly or overtly. Having established such wide creative parameters, I find that dozens of stimulating applications come to mind.

Sometimes I will develop an effect or handling beginning with a single line of script such as with my effect “Half A Coin Trick.” One day I just thought of question, “Would you like to see half a coin trick?” and the routine sprung into existence.

Another effective approach towards developing magic is to consider the routine from a perspective of motivation. In regards to the “Twirl Change,” the obvious question is: why do I shake the card as I do?

Yes, it is a “magic movement” which can suggest a parade of mysterious things, but if you move from the implicit to the explicit it can have a wonderful way of really bringing an effect into focus.

(However, this is far from always the case. There is a great deal to be said for implication in that it leaves room for the audience's supremely powerful imaginations.)

Reflecting upon the “Twirl Change,” I thought about the things humans shake, including bells and rattles. Then I thought about dice and developed a handling where I drew a quick sketch of two die on the back of a card and, with a little shake, the die appeared to change.

And then it struck me, one of those plastic snow globes you see in souvenir shops! I developed my effect Snowstorm (including a handling idea from Richard Sanders).

For me, creating magic is sometimes about locking a few ideas alone in a room in my head and waiting for them to start talking to each other. When they do, I eavesdrop and take notes.

Other times I create with props in hand, slowly trying to arrive at a more direct route to the imagined goal.

I often have an effect in mind and work towards it, but even as I do, I always try to stay open to exciting detours along the way.

Fortunately, over the years I have developed a reliable creative intuition and when it starts tingling, I follow it. However, the majority of the effects I have developed have been the result of concentrated thought.

Hours spent turning things over and over in my head. Hitting a dead-end, taking a break, coming back to it later and starting again.

It really comes down to hard work, doggedness and the faith that there is an awesome effect eagerly waiting to be discovered, just around the next intellectual bend in the road.

## WONDER AND EMOTION

*"When I play from my mind I get in trouble." Stevie Ray Vaughan*

Though an experience of wonder may well have an intellectual component, such stirring moments are often dominated by an emotional component. In fact, given our emotionally repressed culture, perhaps it is through just such experiences such as wonder that our feelings have an opportunity for much needed catharsis.

The all-consuming emotional surges that often accompany a state of wonder raise a line of questions, more seminal than that raised by the intellect. Namely, "How can I feel so strongly in response to a large piece of sculpted granite or a length of celluloid fed through an internally lit machine or a man throwing a rubber ball through a metal hoop?

Why do these things stir me so? What do they remind me of? What do they reveal to me about the world and myself?"

We do not so much ask these questions as feel them. And even as we feel them, we do not expect an answer. They are soulful rhetorical questions we ask of the world in that moment, expressions of our awe inspired by a keen awareness of the limits of our understanding combined with our overwhelming feelings.

In the grips of wonder we know so little and feel so much, which is precisely why the feeling is often described as a child-like state of consciousness.

## ***How Did You Do THAT?***

*"Play well, or play badly, but play truly." – Constantine Stanislavsky*

In response to the tragically perennial question, "How did you do that?" the three most common replies seem to be: "By magic," "Years of practice," and "Very well." In other words: a lie, a reduction of our craft to mere dexterity, and an annoying combination of arrogance and glibness.

Personally, I admit I do not like any of them. "Very well" perfectly echoes the underlying insecurity of too many magicians, insecurity borne of a lack of real-world performing experience.

It also smacks of the misguided belief that mock puffery ("Of course I'm joking, I'm not really as arrogant as I seem!") is an effective stage persona.

Such theatrical "spins" are woefully out-of-date and even when they suited the quaint sensibilities of a black & white era (featuring wry performers wearing turbans, monocles and other such circus garb); they treated the magic as secondary, almost as an aside.

The reply, "Years of practice" plays all too well into the popular misconception among both magicians and laypeople that the art of magic can be reduced to manual technique.

Above, I referred to dexterity as "mere" because, varying aptitude aside, anyone can achieve a smooth Double Lift with enough practice.

Mindful repetition is all that is required, and to suggest that the "how" of a magic performance is the "moves" is not so very different from asking Van Gogh, "How did you do that?" and him replying, "With a paint brush."

I dislike the first two replies, but to me, "By magic" is the most reprehensible. How many times must we hear people say, "I wish I had brought the kids!" before we clue into the fact that the reason many people view magicians primarily as children's entertainers is because too many magicians treat people like children and act like children themselves!

People enquire as to the craft behind our art and we reply by making reference to a patently childish notion, "By magic, of course!" How long is this going to go on?

## ANY EFFECT IS POSSIBLE

*"There is no reality except the one contained within us."*  
*Hermann Hesse*

This is an absolutely essential attitude to adopt when attempting to create magic. Such a belief expresses humility in that to deem something as "impossible" is to suggest you have a complete understanding of the world.

At the same time, the attitude expresses faith in the world's unlimited possibilities and nurtures an unusually receptive state of mind. It also happens to be true.

After all, effects occur in the minds of your audience and given the profound susceptibility and malleability of the human mind, any effect IS possible.

## CYNICISM, CONFUSION AND EGO

*"We can be absolutely certain only about things we do not understand." – Eric Hoffer*

One of the greatest threats to the experience of magic is cynicism. Doubt, not of there being real magic in the world, but rather in the value or even the possibility of experiencing true intimacy and connection through the magic performance.

Just as many spectators agree to take part in a close-up show for many reasons other than a pure love of magic, magicians also perform for a great many reasons, not all of them noble and enlightened.

Cynicism on either side of the deck of cards may not doom the exchange, but it cannot help but severely limit it, especially on emotional levels. To combat this deadly enemy, the magician must nurture his faith in magic as a profound catalyst for transformation.

From the moment he introduces himself to his audience, the magician should be reassuring, encouraging and empowering. Reassuring through eyes that warmly welcome without demanding, encouraging by means of friendly words and inclusive gestures, and empowering by the humble demeanor which exudes a veteran's quiet strength, granting each member of the "just born" audience the power to influence the proceedings and the choice to be actively involved or passively watch.

I am reminded of a quote I once read, "Too many people are taught to respect music, not enough people are taught to love it." The same can be said of magic.



Respect and revere our craft, but introduce yourself to your audience with a love of magic uppermost. More than anything else, that love will combat the cynicism, anxiety and fear often evoked by a magician suddenly appearing in the midst of a surprised group of people.

Confusion also all too often undermines the magic experience, hampering the wonderfully fusing spirit of magic (hence, con/fusion). With a profound "click," an effective magic moment seamlessly brings the previously separate elements of the routine together.

Simultaneously, the performer/audience distinction is (if only for a moment) superseded, resulting in a powerful, gestalt/aha! experience. Confusion in its many forms can only undermine this.

There is confusion of character, the performer suddenly doing or saying something that rings untrue in light of his already established persona.

There is confusion of script, with the verbal presentation being either unclear or not harmoniously supporting the performers actions.

And of course there is confusion of effect (not that you can really separate character or script from the effect). This last typically happens when too many effects are combined, or when the individual effect is presented in a cluttered fashion.

Of course, one of the biggest threats to the transcendent experience is simply bad magic. By that I mean nothing more than magic that fails to create the effect the performer had in mind.

Often, this is due to an overly involved effect, unconvincing technique (acting, script or sleights) or poor routining. An example of the latter would be when a performer opens with his or her strongest effect and then goes on to perform three or four more routines, each less impressive than the last.

There are many more impediments to experiencing wonder, but the final one I would like to touch upon is ego. Like cynicism, ego is a child of fear, an instinctive reaction to an underlying insecurity.

Experienced performers will immediately recognize this in an audience member who tries to control the situation, condescend to the magician or draw attention to himself in a prideful manner.

However, as damaging to the spirit of the show as a spectator's provoked ego can be, the magician's ego can be far more damaging. The big question is: how can you present feats of wonder without pride, vanity or ego?

After all, those are precisely the characteristics people typically associate with magicians.

## FOR MY NEXT TRICK

*"The only thing that keeps the audience in their seats is wondering what's going to happen next." – David Mamet*

As you put your coins back in the purse, gather up the four aces or take a prop out of your case, what happens between your effects? As magicians, we tend to spend a lot more time thinking about the effects themselves rather than the time between our effects, and yet these transitional moments are at least as important as the moments during an effect.

One reason is that it is precisely during this "in between time" that we run the greatest risk of losing the audience's focus. And without their focus, we have absolutely nothing. Nada. Zilch. Their attention is truly the lifeblood of the show.

Think about it this way. As crucial as it is for the performer to be keenly focused on his performance, the reality is that many magicians sometimes perform with their mind on autopilot and the show still goes fine.

But if an audience is not sincerely interested in the show, there is no autopilot option. The show quickly grinds to a halt. Maintaining focus is absolutely essential, though it can be far from easy, especially in a noisy, distracting environment like a bar or a party.

People tend to be instinctively interested in the beginning of an effect. After all, the effect just started, it has novelty on its side and has not had any time to become dull. Audiences also tend to be interested in the culmination of an effect when the drama is at its peak.

And as for the middle of an effect, so long as the routine is not overly long and the performer is adept at building tension and expectation, an audience will seldom disconnect halfway through. Which leaves the time in between your effects as the moments when people's focus is most likely to wander.

One of the best ways to reduce the chances of this happening is to maintain a narrative through-line. For example, if you have just finished an especially eerie effect, you can say, "Yeah, I know, pretty scary, but if you think that's weird, you won't believe this . . ."

It is an admittedly simple example, but with a brief comment it can be that easy to move from one effect to the next while keeping a strong sense of organic progression.

Note how such an approach is almost the exact opposite of saying the classic line, "For my next trick . . ." That phrase actually invites the audience to detach from the show by making an explicit reference to that fact that it is a show and you are "going through your paces." Once you have captured the attention and imagination of your audience, you must protect it all costs.

Routining is the key to maintaining a "there is only us, and there is only now" mentality. In other words, the effects you choose, the order you choose to perform them and how you guide the audience's focus from one effect to the next is an art within itself. And more often than not you would do well to strive for transitions that are as seamless as possible.

To combat the possibility of "audience disconnection," I often make a point of explicitly addressing them and "touching base" with them between effects.

For example, having just finished a card effect, you could turn to one spectator and say, "I know what you're thinking. You wouldn't want to play cards with me, right? Actually, I gotta admit, I'm pretty good at finding the four Aces . . . " and there you are, segueing into another effect.

Apart from using your script, there are many other ways to create an effective transition.

Just as the final shock of a coin routine is beginning to dissipate, you could pick up one of the coins, give it a squeeze and change it into a sponge ball. This immediately creates fresh interest and neatly transports the audience into another routine.

However, keep in mind that the goal of routining is more ambitious than simply maintaining focus (as challenging as that can be). Ultimately, you want to routine your effects so that there is a powerful build to your overall performance. Traditionally, the goal is to start strong, end stronger and have all the effects in between garner a range of powerful responses.

The length of your performance should profoundly influence your routining. When I only have three minutes at a table, and the audience is clearly "up for an exciting ride," I often try to pack as much devastating magic into those one hundred and eighty seconds as possible. Bam, bam, bam, bam! "Thanks and have a wonderful night." Exit.

However, sometimes I will approach a table and immediately get a sense that, though the people are open to experiencing some magic, they would like it at a more leisurely pace. So I will take a little more time with each effect and strive for a poetic and gently playful feel. Still, I want to start strong, end strong and have the audience feel a definite building of drama.

Of course, given that you are striving for seamless transitions and a steady build, an audience does not experience the best performances as a collection of effects but rather one powerful effect.

If asked, they could break the experience down into, "He did this, and then this happened, and then this . . . " but when they later say, "That guy was astounding," they are referring to the overall experience. They are not distinguishing between you, your effects and their experience.

## AUDIENCE FEEDBACK

*"The theater is not a place where one should go to forget, but rather a place where one should go to remember." – David Mamet*

The audience is always giving you feedback. Information that is vitally important to your development as a performing artist.

The question is: do you want that feedback? Really? Are you sure you would not rather just stick to your effects and your fantasy of being "a great magician?"

Many magicians I have watched seem decidedly uninterested in being intimate with their audiences, and without a desire for intimacy you only receive the most superficial feedback.

Without at least being open to being intimate you will fail to really hear, see and -most importantly- sense your audience. Moreover, a lack of that same openness on the part of your audience will prevent them from responding honestly and spontaneously, and again, you will not receive the feedback you need.

As with all relationships, the challenge is that, if you open yourself up for the joy of positive response, you also open yourself up for negative response. And that can really hurt, especially when your love of magic is on the line (or at least that is sometimes how it can feel).

We have all asked someone to pick a card at a table in a restaurant and had them reach instead for another piece of bread.

We have all had an audience going crazy for our magic; then suddenly a spectator grabs our wrist, turns it over and reveals a coin in Classic Palm. It sucks. The circus has definitely left town and it is starting to rain.

But there really is no other choice, not if you want to become a fine magician and a true artist. That requires being intimate with your audience (whether you perform close-up or stage) and keenly listening to the response they supply.

In stand-up comedy, I have heard many comics say, "I do that joke for me." Typically, it is a joke that gets a very poor response and for some reason the comic feels he is within his rights to tell a joke that is "just for him." I strongly disagree.

Above all else, performance art is based on a mutual trust between the actor and the audience, whatever the context. All else follows from it, and for either party to do something "just for themselves" is to break with that trust. It works against the entire endeavor and reveals a selfish nature, usually borne of fear.

In your search for authentic audience reaction, I am in no way suggesting you should become a slave to your audience (or vice versa, as is often encouraged in magic circles). I am suggesting you consider your interests as interdependent, and show equal respect for both. I believe that is the way to true empowerment for any student of the theatre.



# THE OPPOSITE OF MAGIC

*"The eye altering, alters all." - William Blake*

Have you ever wondered what the opposite of magic might be? We are often so steeped in givens and assumptions about our craft that I suspect we lose sight of what exactly it is we are trying to achieve, especially regarding our audiences.

I am not suggesting that we should all be trying to achieve the same thing, only that as unique performers with a range of goals, each of us would do well to ask ourselves what we mean by the term, "magic."

Magic is "what a magician does," fine, but what exactly is that? Let us consider this question in light of an idea proposed by the philosopher Wittgenstein who argued that a word only has a clear meaning if you can also conceive of its opposite.

So what is the opposite of magic? The predictable? The unmysterious? Perhaps the everyday? By ruminating on magic's opposite (the non or even anti-magical), each of us cannot help but gain valuable insight into our own vision of the magical.

Another similar exercise is to critique, not some of your favorite effects and performers, but rather your least favorite. What is it about that effect which you find so disagreeable? And out of a world of magicians, why do you dislike so-and-so's work so much?

It is interesting to note that more than a few psychologists believe that the things we dislike may well be dark reflections of ourselves.

One theory is that they are disowned parts of ourselves, aspects of our personalities that -for some reason- we rejected during our formative years.

In that case, perhaps the reason why some of us have a difficult time watching a magician in a tight-fitting, sequined tuxedo whack linking rings together to Spanish music is because deep down we all secretly yearn to be disco matadors.

A similar psychology theory insists that we criticize what we ourselves are all too capable of doing. In that case, I beg you, keep me away from the Lota Bowl.

Whatever you think of these theories, I believe you will nonetheless find that a few moments pondering your thoughts regarding magic's opposite will be time well invested. After all, shadows can be as revealing as light.

## SIMPLICITY

*"Good things, when short, are twice as good." Baltasar Gracian*

There is magic to simplicity. Part of the power of simplicity is that it requires a kind of concentrated commitment. With the involved or complicated you can choose to fully commit to some parts, but perhaps not others.

There is also the temptation to focus on some aspects more than others, or to tell yourself, "Now is not quite the time, but in a moment it will be."

However, with truly simple effects involving a single climax arrived at in an elegantly direct fashion, there is only now. This is the moment for complete concentration and commitment.

The power of simplicity is also naturally experienced by spectators/participants. While complicated routines create many opportunities for confusion, simple effects ring clear and true. Such direct illusions also leave far less room for skeptical individuals to water down their experience of the proceedings in their resistant minds.

In this way, simplicity can be quite demanding for both the audience and the performer, as it urges an "all or nothing" sensibility. I am reminded of a parable I once read about a man shopping for a ladle.

After spending quite some time in a sophisticated kitchen supplies store, he narrowed his preferences down to two ladles. One was quite ornate, the other extremely simple.

In asking about the prices of the two, he was surprised to discover that the simple design cost three times as much as the ornate one.

"You see," said the clerk, "with the ornate design, any tiny flaws can be concealed within the pattern of lines and grooves, while with the extremely simple design there is no place to hide any such flaws. It must be perfect, and requiring a greater degree of craftsmanship, it costs more."

## THE EMOTIONAL CAMERA

*"An editor can make a movie where the director has failed." Ian Rankin*

As important as it is to make appeals to the eyes of your audience via key images, it is equally important to make appeals to their emotions through scripting and authentic interaction. What they see is important, but how they interpret what they see, literally how they see what they see, is at least as important.

Given the primacy of emotions, in a very real sense how people see is what they see. We each live inside our feelings, experiencing the world from moment to moment through our feelings. As a result, this emotional component should be factored into the development of every effect.

Early on in this process, as you ask yourself, "What are the key images of the effect?" also ask yourself, "What are the feelings I am trying to inspire/explore?"

These two questions are as intimately related as Siamese Twins. Another crucial question that directly impacts the previous two is, "In which order should I present the key images?"

Take for example the final few moments of a copper/silver transposition routine. Having apparently just put the copper coin in the left hand and then the silver coin in the right, do you then first open the right hand to show it has changed to copper (after which you open your left hand to reveal the silver coin) or do you open the left hand first and then the right?

The order of these revelations profoundly influences the audience's experience and creation of the effect. And considering the subjectivity of their involvement, the word "creation" is accurate.

Remember, with all our practice and experience, in the end we are still only presenting our audiences with the raw ingredients.

Even if, through our presentations we give these ingredients a good stir, each spectator still adds his or her own unique spices and it is in their minds the effect is finally baked.

## THE IMPERFECT THEORY

*"Slight not what's near through aiming at what's far." - Euripides*

It has always annoyed me when I hear magicians discussing the so-called, "Too Perfect Theory." Perfection is by definition an absolute state and as such it is not incremental.

A thing either is or is not perfect. With that in mind, tying the word "perfect" with the word "too" is a marriage made in semantic hell. Utter nonsense.

The second (and more significant) reason I feel frustrated when the "Too Perfect Theory" comes up in conversation is because, if a routine is developed in such a way as to raise serious issues of credibility, the routine is not only not "too perfect," it is imperfect.

With this in mind, I would like to humbly suggest that the "Too Perfect Theory" should now and forever be referred to as the "Imperfect Theory" (I will not hold my breath waiting for this shift of labels).

What exactly is this theory? Simply that, in order to maintain the audience's belief in an effect the performer sometimes has to add what would otherwise be an unnecessary action or word.

One example that comes up a lot involves a selected card and a matchbox. Imagine placing the matchbox on the table, then, after having a card selected and returned to the pack, a spectator is asked to open the matchbox and the selection is found folded up inside.

Assuming the card is unsigned and a duplicate is involved, the physics of the routine do not require the magician to ever touch the matchbox.

However, some argue that the performer should touch the matchbox, if only for a moment, to introduce the possibility of sleight-of-hand or some such trickery.

The same argument goes that if you do not touch the matchbox, many members of the ever-theorizing audience will jump to the conclusion that a duplicate card was involved. In my experience, this last assertion is correct.

To be effective, duplicate cards must be handled in just the right way and I suspect the outlined card-to- matchbox routine is too bold.

Credibility is everything, and if, after developing a routine, you believe you have to add a move to maintain credibility, I would strongly suggest that the entire routine be chucked in the trash and you start again from the beginning.

Chances are, there is something wrong with the underlying structure and it will not be redeemed by the addition of a single word or action, especially if the move is included, not in the name of plot or pathos, but in the name of opening a door for conjecture.

I am not of the school of magical thinkers who believe spectators will always have their theories and that the performer must make certain allowances for this.

Instead I am of the admittedly more romantic school that believes in the goal of charming an audience to such a degree that they transcend this instinct to theorize altogether.



## THE APPROACH

*"The true adventurer goes forth aimless and uncalculating to meet and greet unknown fate." -O. Henry*

When performing as a walk-around entertainer I advise that you do not ask people, "Would you like to see a little magic?" After all, they are not qualified to answer! The vast majority of people I meet have never before taken part in a professional close-up magic show.

They have only ever watched an illusionist decapitate a Playboy bunny on television or witnessed a clown/aroused babysitter at a children's party spend thirty standing too close to the children tying handkerchiefs on a length of rope as an unconscious cry for help.

This is extremely different than being intimately involved in a live performance of sleight-of-hand magic for adults. Instead of asking for their permission, I look around the performance space and decide which groups of people to approach.

Then I walk up, introduce myself, shake a hand or two and tell them I am a magician who has "been asked to walk around and show everyone a quick trick."

There are many advantages to such an introduction. It is brief, honest and does not ask them to make a choice based on precious little information.

The introduction is also very reassuring in that the word "quick" informs them that the performance will be brief (asking very little of their time or focus) and the word "trick" conveys both a lack of self-importance and a lack of challenge.

For over twenty years, this kind of introduction has served me well in the smoke-filled trenches as a professional walk-around magician, but it nonetheless has at least one serious disadvantage.

Even as it effectively quells the potential anxieties of the people I approach, it simultaneously perpetuates the view of magic as an art of (mere) "quick tricks," precisely the kind of limited perception that I find disheartening!

However, to "take" people anywhere, you first must get them "on your bus." You need their interest and trust. Have I been able to create an introduction that completely defuses the situation, invites the audience into my theatre, seducing, reassuring and relaxing, while simultaneously meeting my more progressive goals as an artist? Not quite.

After all, few things turn-off an audience more than an artiste, i.e., a performer with an air of self-importance or a "message." And keep in mind, ego or arrogance is exactly what the general public is oh so quick to hold against performers. Suffice it to say that, given the diversity of both my commercial and artistic goals,

I have yet to write the perfect introduction. Like everything else with my magic, it is a work in progress.

As important as your introductory words are, your attitude is even more important.

I suggest you be polite, friendly, reassuring, complimentary and especially mindful that the audience has power. This applies as much to approaching one person as fifteen.

Actually, unlike many professionals I have chatted with, I quite enjoy performing for individuals sitting alone at a table or perhaps on a couch at a cocktail party situation, though of course it presents its own unique interpersonal performance challenges.

A person alone may feel especially vulnerable and even "picked out from the crowd," so I tone down my energy, shifting it from "performer" to almost fellow conspirator, silently sending the message of "nobody's watching us."

I try to create a sense that the two of us are alone in a bubble, just off to the side of the social event which, for the time being, we are separate from.

A lot like two strangers standing alone at a bus stop, this is one of the few situations where I may even sit down while working, just to encourage this sense of the two of us being alone and on the "same level."

## INSPIRING HUMILITY

*"Angels can fly because they take themselves so lightly." G.K. Chesterton*

For me, humility is not about being self-denigrating or aggrandizing, but about both an acceptance and an awareness of two primary aspects of my being, namely my membership in humankind and my own unique personality.

Essentially what I share and what is exclusive to me. I use such terms as "membership" and "unique" in a non-evaluative fashion. For a person to be aware of only their membership or only their unique personality is, for me, to not only lack humility, but also a balancing awareness of your lot in this life.

A performance of magic presented by a secure, joyful, creative and generous magician can be a very humbling experience for an audience. Not humiliating or belittling, but rather a humbling reminder of the limits, not just of their own understanding, but of human understanding in general, i.e. a limit we all share.

Mind you, in this "age of information" it can be no small challenge for an audience to "own" this limited understanding, and so, at the same time as I deliberately set-out to mystify my audience, I always try to shift the focus away from the methods behind the effects, and even to a certain degree from the effects themselves, to an awareness of the magic of the performer/audience interplay.

And it is through this beautiful interplay, especially in close-up magic, that my audiences (as well as myself) have an opportunity to become more conscious of our own distinct personalities, i.e. that which makes each of us unique.

A person may not need to be humble in order to enjoy the experience of magic, but being in touch with a sense of our humility creates a significantly more receptive state of mind, which in turn can only benefit the magic experience. And of course, the best way for performers to inspire humility in their audiences is to convey a strong sense of humility themselves.

This is not easy for a magician to do. Due to the explicit relationship between the popular ideas of magic and power, even if a performer is a humble individual, his audience may find it difficult to see this, especially if members of the audience are instinctively threatened by what they do not readily understand (as many of us are).

Consequently, even as we practice our sleights, refine our presentations and explore what meaning there is for us in our magic, it is equally as important for us to develop ways to monitor our own humility while also presenting our art in ways which inspire humility in our audiences.

Only then will we both be fully open to receiving the miraculously wide range of benefits inherent in the magic experience.

## THE WONDER OF WIT

*"Everyone likes a kidder, but nobody lends him money." – Arthur Miller*

There is something decidedly magical about wit. Even in its written form, when a comment reveals a refreshing insight, especially within a familiar arena, there is a burst of energy and an experience not unlike when the magician produces a bunch of silk flowers "from nowhere."

However, unlike the sudden appearance of faux vegetation, wit tends to allude to a meaningful relationship between two or more well-known entities. The witty comment suddenly yanks away the handkerchief et voila, what was hidden is now revealed.

Part of wit's unique charm is that, unlike an overt magic effect, there is seldom a sense of anything hidden or lying in wait prior to the revelation.

Wit in its spontaneous verbal form it is even more magical. To produce a line or comment, obviously on the spur of the moment (after all, the line was in response to a spectator's comment about her son's recent birthday party) can appear like a true feat of magic, complete with similar accompanying remarks, "He's pretty fast!"

Improvised wit also has a profoundly grounding effect on both the performer and the audience because improvisation, by definition, is perfectly of the moment and unique to that particular situation.

I love wit. I love the combination of insight, deftness and daring.

To not only say sparkling, funny things, but to even run the risk of offending, then instead charm, now that is a thrill! Improvising is magic and juggling combined, and much of its strength lies in its ability to reveal new truths.

Two extremely powerful things, the "new" and the "true." Novelty alone is stimulating. Combined with insight it is a tool capable of inspiring awe. However, such a tool can be easily mishandled so that it offends and separates the performer and audience rather than nurturing an intimacy.

For this reason, the first few witty comments I make in front of a new audience tend to be gently self-deprecating. I will often ask someone if I look like a magician, to which they often reply, "No." In response,

I look a little embarrassed and say, "Thanks for the support!" Self-deprecation can be an extremely dependable way to get an audience on your side, but be sure to keep it gentle. If you are too rough on anyone (yourself or a spectator) it will only reflect badly on you.

After mentioning I am a magician, I will also often quip, "I know what you're thinking, 'A little more height and hair might be more convincing, Merlin!'" Another self-deprecating line, but I always deliver it with my shoulders back and a big warm smile on my face.

My posture and delivery exude strength and confidence while the line undercuts any misperceptions of me as cocky. This in turn only adds to my apparent comfort and sense of security.

Having tossed a few playful darts in my own direction, people will be open to a few witty comments sent their way and even take it as a compliment.

Take it as a sign that you trust that they are a secure enough person to not take it “the wrong way.” But of course, choosing the right people to joke with and choosing the right joke is everything. Learning this takes years of performing for “real people” on a regular basis.

Keep in mind, self-deprecating material will not work for everyone, especially if they do not have strong self-esteem. In such cases, the words ring a little too true and can create an uncomfortable mood.



## CLASSIC AUDIENCE MEMBERS

*"Man has four faces. The one he shows to the world, the one he shows to his friends, the one he shows to those he truly holds dear, and the real one." – Charles Fourier*

Just as it is true that no two members of an audience ever possess quite the same personality, in many intimate groups of people you nonetheless often find one or more examples of a small handful of classic audience members.

First there is The Shy Person. More often a woman than a man, when you introduce yourself to the group you get the distinct impression that she wishes a hole would suddenly open in the floor and she could jump inside.

Along with suddenly looking extremely nervous, she may even blush. This can trigger a variety of feelings in the performer from nervousness to condescension and even annoyance, but now is not the time to make even the slightest joke about her shyness or, worse still, try to force her to "loosen up."

My advice is to lower your energy level a little bit, look directly at her, give her a reassuring smile and then immediately shift your attention to another member of the audience. Then as you share your first effect with the group, be sure to regularly glance towards the shy person so that she feels included. Send a message of, "It's okay if you don't want to be directly involved."

You can still enjoy the show from over there." After gently watering this person over several minutes, if you get a sense that she is relaxed and would perhaps even like to get more actively involved, have her play a minor part in an effect. Remember, she is already stretching.

The next classic audience is Mr. Loud, and yes, he is more often a man than a woman. The behavior of both The Shy Person and Mr. Loud often stem from the same emotion: discomfort. Mr. Loud is forever making "funny" comments and is in a big rush to be as involved as possible. He wants to be the one to pick the cards, polish the Dove Pan and grease the needle for *Needle Through the Balloon*.

Not because he is trying to be helpful, rather, he wants to be in control. When dealing with this guy, it is crucial you keep in mind that his intentions are not malicious. He simply feels a little threatened by the idea of magic and his feelings are getting the better of him.

I suggest you give him Mr. Loud a little attention, joke around with him for a moment or two, and hopefully that will do the trick so that when you turn your attention to someone else, Mr. Loud has a chance to get control of his emotions, and in doing so, no longer needs to try to control the situation.

You may have to reply to one or two more of his comments or quips during the show. That is all well and good, but he must be kept on a short leash. If his controlling nature is given too much room to run wild, this character is all too capable of spoiling the experience for everyone involved and you have responsibility to make sure that does not happen.

Then of course, there is The Know-It-All. One of the best ways to deal with this personality is to reduce the probability that he or she pops up in the first place by performing your effects in a friendly spirit of sharing rather than as an implicit challenge.

This personality sees magic as a series of puzzles to be solved and in order to quell this instinctive response I send a message of, "it's all just a little fun" through my script and demeanor.

Whenever I encounter a know-it-all, I also always make a point to immediately perform one of my most powerful effects, but I do not get the know-it-all directly involved.

Instead, I allow him to witness and accept that what I do is well beyond the reach of his half-baked theories.

But this does not always work. In such cases I adopt a "script within a script." While continuing to share my magic with other people in the group, the next time the know-it-all offers a theory, I draw everyone else's attention to whatever I am holding in my hands and then take the opportunity to look the Know-It-All straight in the eyes.

I acknowledge his challenge and at the same time give him a look that says, "Come on. Don't be such a killjoy. You're a bigger person than that, aren't you?"

This is not an easy look to give someone, especially because it must not contain even a hint of aggression or concern. If he thinks you are challenging him, he will likely rise to it, and if feels you are scared, he will often continue with renewed vigor.

If however, you adopt a tactic which seems to quiet him down, thank your lucky stars and, whatever you do, do not ask him to get directly involved in an effect. Let sleeping dogs lie.

And again, keep in mind that, though many people enjoy solving puzzles for the satisfaction of having been able to figure them out, Mr. Know-It-All's behavior is also often a response to feeling challenged and even threatened on some level.

Do not fight fire with fire. Water is much more effective.

This character's insistence on relating to magic on a strictly intellectual level may also be an attempt to emotionally distance himself from the proceedings, which of course, is his prerogative.

I personally love the delicate challenge of defusing the puzzle-solving mind set while, at the same time subtly trying to, in a sense, emotionally seduce the Know-It-All.

Many such characters actually think that it is "part of the game" for them to not only try to figure out the mechanical methods behind the magic, but also to express their theories out loud. Unfortunately, many people believe that magic is performed in the spirit of a three shell game. They simply do not know any better. Instead of trying to sabotage the experience, some Know-It-Alls might actually be trying to help by playing their "part!"

Another classic character is the Drunk Flirt. For several reasons, I do not enjoy working for people who have been drinking heavily.

First, given the amount of alcohol in their blood, I have a difficult time seeing their responses as "real," and because what I bring to the table is real, including my skills, hopes, intentions and aspirations, I want the same in return. And second, drunk people tend to have very mercurial emotions and as a result I tend to tread more carefully than I enjoy.

As for the Drunk Flirt (or the sober flirt for that matter) I will either gently ignore her or him or flirt back in a way that clearly communicates to everyone present, "Okay, I'll play along. But that's all it is, play."

For me, the most challenging of the classic audience characters is the Jerk. Both men and women can play this part, drunk or sober.

This is the spectator with malicious intent, the one who really just wants to screw things up for you and make you look like "the fool." As always, the best way to deal with conflict is to try to make sure it does not come up in the first place.

When I worked a lot as a stand-up comic, I very rarely got heckled because my humor was decidedly self-effacing. I am not suggesting you perform your magic in a self-effacing way, only that you should strongly guard against seeming conceited or arrogant.

These are precisely the traits that coax the jerk to come out swinging. When he does, there is no way to subtly handle this character type.

My response to him is in three parts. First I give the dice a quick roll to see if maybe, against the odds, I can stop him from damaging the show without having to "flex my muscles."

I do this by responding to his first obviously impolite or unkind comment by looking him directly in the eyes, giving him my biggest confident smile and then almost completely turning my back on him as I turn to chat with another member of the audience.

Unlike my response to the know-it-all, there is definitely a hint of aggression in my eyes and smile that says, "Don't mess with me." In situations where I get a strong sense that several people would really like to enjoy the show but one person is a mean-spirited ass, for the sake of the other people I will try two other tactics.

I will either perform one of my most powerful close-up effects (for example, my folded card in paperclip routine) or send a few quick one-liners towards the jerk, nothing too harsh or designed to humiliate, but a few witty comments to let him know that if he is going to take a run at me, I'm going to shut him down.

It is a situation of defuse, shut down or move onto another table because in such an intimate performing environment, trying to ignore him for ten minutes is simply not going to work.

As with all of your responses, you have to make a judgment call and even though over the years you will become a much better evaluator you will still make mistakes.

In this instance, you may mistake a guy who just needed a tiny bit more attention with a hardcore Jerk. Ignoring a jerk will seldom work, but it may be worth a try for a minute or two. Maybe you can get through two quick effects and move on to another group.

The next character is the Magic Hobbyist. Though this person can be a little annoying, more often than not the reason they are in such a rush to show you a card trick or compliment you on your "French Drop" (though you used no such technique) is because they really just want to impress you.

This is sweet, but as I said, it can be frustrating. My advice is to be polite, thank him for the compliment and move on. If he insists on showing you a trick, glance at your watch and tell him, "I'd really like that but I only have another twenty minutes to perform for all these people, you know how it is." (Inclusion is always a powerful tact.)

Mind you, if you would like to take a break for a few minutes during a long evening of performing, it may not be such a bad idea to let him show you a trick in some relatively private corner of the performing area.

You will still be fulfilling your job of "entertaining the people" (by indulging one of them) and you will certainly be giving something back to our craft by encouraging a beginner.

We now come to the final classic audience character, and I have most definitely saved the best for last, the Avid Magic Fan. God bless their hearts.

We have all been in a situation where we find ourselves performing for a few tables in a row and though everything went fine, sparks never flew. And then you approach the next table and wham . . . a handful of people who absolutely love magic!

"We heard there was a magician here and we were really hoping you would come over." Music to our ears! Make a conscious effort to shift your emotional gears down to a more relaxed, open and trusting state of mind.

Be sure to take some time with this beautiful group because it is precisely with people like this that you will do some of your best work. Indulge yourself and crack open your repertoire.

Yes, ideally it is wise to "always leave them wanting more," but with avid magic fans, push the limits a bit with an eye towards your own growth.

Do some killer stuff, toss in one or two newer effects and be sure to take the time to give the fans an opportunity to see a healthy dose of magic.

At the same time, give yourself the opportunity to be watered and really appreciated for your talent and hard work. Such chances do not come every day and you have an obligation to your creative self to make the very most of them.

Trust such audiences to appreciate you, receive the appreciation as best you can, then be sure to appreciate them in return.



## PERFORMING NEW MATERIAL

*"The man who makes no mistakes does not usually make anything." – William Connor Magee*

When should you perform a new effect? The same day you bought it at the magic shop in order to get an immediate sense of the routine's impact?

After fiddling around with it for a week so that you have a better chance of not screwing it up? Or should you wait until you have really polished the handling and the script over several weeks of practice and rehearsal?

I believe magicians often try out a new effect either too soon or too late.

If you rush to show an effect you just bought to a friend or spouse you are not going to get a fair sense of the routine's effectiveness.

You are merely going to get a sense of the impact based on precious little practice and rehearsal. Of what value is such feedback?

Alternatively, if you spend weeks or even months refining the handling and presentation before performing it for a live audience, you might find that it either does not suit your style and taste, or that it does not play as well as you thought it would.

And frankly, I do not believe you can polish or effectively refine an effect in isolation. You need the audience's input!

With all that in mind, my advice is to spend no more than a couple of weeks diligently practicing the required sleights, rehearsing the entire effect and developing a rough idea of your script. Then start performing it for real people.

If you are serious about developing your repertoire, never invest time or money in an effect that you are not prepared to perform at least ten times (even if you have to force yourself to do it after the first few times)!

If you are disappointed by the audience response during a first or second performance, do not "toss it on the shelf." That is a terrible waste, especially considering that there was something about the routine that initially excited you.

Even if the first few times you perform the effect it leaves your audiences cold, do not give up just yet. Stick with it at least a little while longer, if only to be absolutely sure that you are not able to make the routine work for you at this time.

I say "at this time" because, as your performance style shifts and your understanding of your own magic grows, you may well find that effects which "were not working for you" a year or two ago, suddenly become your favorites.

The other reason to not prematurely abandon a routine is because learning to deal with less than enthusiastic audience response is one of the best ways to gain your "performance legs."

Remember, it is all part of a sacred process, with the goal being, not so much "killing tonight," but becoming a master magician. That takes time.

I tend to try out new material for couples instead of individuals or large groups. I want to see how more than one person responds to it (increasing my feedback information), but I do not want to leave too many people utterly un-amazed if the effect "bombs."

I also try to perform for a couple off to the side or in a corner, as far from the main performances areas as possible. After all, if it does not go well, the fewer the witnesses the better.

And because it is crucial that the new effect receives as much support as possible, I never open with a brand new routine (unless of course it is an opener). And if my opening effect fails to hit the couple between the eyes, I postpone trying out the new material because the scenario will not yield the kind of feedback I need.

## RHYTHM

*"It does not matter how fast or slow you go. Just don't stop." - Confucius*

Most of us prefer to practice certain aspects of performance rather than others. Some magicians enjoy working on the presentation and some on the sleights, but far fewer performers explore and refine the rhythm of the effect.

Yet to my mind, rhythm is one of the true keys to any routine in that is it all about having a feel for the timing, motion and stillness that exists between the discrete elements of the effect.

How long after the climax of a previous effect do you begin the introductory comments or actions of the next effect? How do your hands move in relationship to your audience, your body and even each other?

The question of rhythm applies to every moment of a performance with all words and gestures (overt or concealed) ultimately occurring in relationship to the underlying rhythm of the quietly beating organs inside the chests of both the audience and the performer.

This may well sound microscopically academic, but being sensitive to the large or small rhythms existing in a performance is far from irrelevant.

Think of how, when you say a sentence or display a playing card with exaggerated slowness, it dramatically influences the audience's experience of that moment.

And inversely how, when you say something very quickly or try to "get away" with a move by executing it with great speed, an entirely different message is sent to the crowd.

Rhythm has content and meaning. It not only suggests, but also powerfully communicates.

Practice your sleights, routining, scripts and presentations, but when it comes time to rehearse, be sure to make an ally of rhythm as well.

## VULGAR MAGIC

*"Audacity, more audacity, and always audacity!" – George Jacques Danton*

Where are our vulgar magicians? There are painters, sculptures, musicians and certainly dancers that are considered by many to be vulgar. Yet, I cannot think of a single magician who is generally considered to be vulgar.

Of course, there is no shortage of sloppy or graceless magical performers, and there are magicians who combine vulgar comedy with their magic. But what of magic that is in itself vulgar?

Even the so-called "bad boys of magic" Penn & Teller perform decidedly traditional effects combined with deliberately outrageous stunts and bits of business.

This very deliberateness reveals them to be the boys they claim to be, throwing stones at old school windows, giving away whatever creative powers they may possess to conservative, white-bread middle America.

Can you imagine Picasso or Elvis calling themselves "bad boys?" In their day, both artists were commonly thought of as vulgar, but not because they set out to attack dust-covered, mainstream sacred cows. Rather, they were deemed vulgar due to the rawness and originality of their talents.

I think the remarkable dearth of true vulgarity in magic is yet another symptom of the lack of courage, passion and imagination among us.

We can all name magicians whose work we find uninteresting, but can you name a performer whose magic you actually take exception with? Magic that you find offensive? What would such magic even look like?

With the Fitzkee view of magic in mind (i.e., a catalog of vanishes, appearances, transformations, levitations, etc.), ask yourself, "What would a vulgar transformation look like?"

Of course, in specifically setting out to create vulgar work, we once again give away our creative power to an inevitably compromising goal.

One of the paradoxes of our craft is that those with the most performing experience are often the least creative among us, i.e., full-time professionals.

In fact, more often than not they achieve all that experience by not taking creative chances, once again, the exact opposite of most of the successful work done in other arts.

All too often, magic professionals cite, "I have to pay the rent" as to why they stick so closely to woefully traditional routines and presentations.

Yet even professional stand-up comics, most of whom are paid much less than your average magician, have "new material" nights, shows which not only encourage experimentation, but actually insist upon it.

Until our collective attitude towards creating original magic shifts, there is little reason to believe that we will witness a great deal of new work, vulgar or beautiful.

## WHOSE MAGIC IS IT?

*"The music is the most important thing. The guitar is only the instrument." - Jerry Garcia*

Is the magic you present yours? If so, do you demonstrate your magic, share it or give it away like a present?

Does the magic that occurs during your show belong to the audience? If so, do you reveal their own magic to them or do you inspire them to express it?

Does the magic instead belong to everyone? If so, do you reveal the truth of this collective power with pride or humility?

Or does the magic belong to no one, as a mystery larger than us all? If so, and if it cannot be owned, are you temporarily harnessing it or revealing it?

Where does the magic you perform come from? Unless you are a member of the school of Voodoo Romance Storytelling (Ooga Booga 101), your answers to these questions will not appear in your scripting, but be more a matter of theatrical subtext.

Either way, the more fully you understand your unique relationship to your idea of magic, the more credible and powerful your performances will be.

When I take a step back and attempt to assess my own performing style I find that my work expresses a wide variety of attitudes towards magic.

I also realize that I am a little disappointed in this variety because I believe that such variety can only undermine the uniformity of the audience's experience.



One moment I am "demonstrating," the next I am "guiding," and the next moment I am acting like I had nothing whatsoever to do with the magic.

Sometimes, when I consider how cluttered and theatrically unfocused my style is at times, I am keenly aware of just how much room is left for improvement.

## LEARNING FROM MIME

*"The poet is the priest of the invisible." – Wallace Stevens*

Despite having made more than my fair share of jokes about mimes over the years, I nonetheless believe that magicians can learn a lot from mimes (actually, perhaps it is precisely because I have sensed this truth all along that I have been so tempted to make fun of them).

Mimes undoubtedly create powerful illusions, but the question of "How?" never really comes up. Is it because it is obvious how they create the illusions that they do? I think not. I think it is because the nature of the mime performance does not trigger the puzzle solving mindset.

It is obviously an artful illusion and is accepted as such. The "how" is a non-issue and the audience is solely interested in the style and narrative.

As trite as the narratives of some mime performance may well be (man walking into the wind, man pulling himself along a piece of rope, man shaving goat in the back of a taxi), I think there is much we can learn from the fact that mimes do not so much try to convince us of the reality of their illusion, but rather share with us their experience of the invisible world in which they find themselves.

## TRUTH AND CREDIBILITY

*"You can't make a living from telling the truth." – Ian Sansom*

If you have ever sat in the audience at a stand-up comedy club, the chances are extremely good that you heard one of the comics utter the classic phrase, "True story."

Typically, this is said after a joke failed to inspire much laughter. Comics say these two words after a lukewarm response to take a bit of the edge off the unexpected lull and also as a last ditch effort to, if not actually save the joke, at least validate it.

The phrase, "True story" also echoes the ancient comedy platitude, "It's funny because it's true." In my experience this cliché is false. It is not so much the truth of an idea that makes people laugh, but the credibility of the idea.

Of course, ideas or statements that are true are also very often credible, but there are plenty of true statements that are incredible, just as there are plenty of lies that are credible. What does all of this have to do with magic?

Well, imagine you cut your finger chopping vegetables for dinner, then the following evening you approach a table and begin to perform magic with a bandage wrapped around your finger. Despite any truthful explanations you may offer, people will still be suspicious.

A perfect example of the reverse of this (a credible lie) is Ron Wilson's opening line with the Color Changing Knives. He simply walks by his next "target table," stops, bends down and pretends to pick-up the knife off the floor.

Then he politely asks the people sitting at the table, "Excuse me. Did anyone lose a black pocketknife? No? How about a . . . white pocketknife."

After the first change, he goes into the full routine from there, an ingenious "fit" for the situation, audience, performer and routine.

Believable deceptions are an essential part of our craft, and for us to inspire the maximum amount of wonder it is critical that we keep the distinction between the true and the credible in mind.

While for many people the word "true" suggests a fixed, objective reality, the word "credible" immediately poses vital questions about your audience, performance context, etc. It explicitly points towards the idea of belief and the subjectivity of the human experience.

Ultimately, the truth has nothing whatsoever to do with the effectiveness of an artful deception. People either believe it, thereby giving the performer something to work with, or they do not.

## MINIMUM EFFORT

*"The less effort, the faster and more powerful you will be." Bruce Lee*

For over fifteen years I held the deck too tightly. I could still perform strong card magic, but it was not until I was in my sixteenth year as a student of sleight-of-hand that I finally felt my grip relax.

Actually, the word "finally" may be misleading in that it suggests I was waiting for this manual mellowing. I was not. I had no idea it would happen until it did.

In contrast, my coin magic has been pretty loose since I was a teenager, perhaps because I first fell in love with magic while learning coin techniques.

I still remember attending a David Roth lecture where he advised that, "When Classic palming a coin, it should be held in your palm so gently that just a tiny tap on the back of your hand can dislodge the coin."

I thought it was an interesting point, but I admit it did not make much of an impression on me at the time.

Then one day several years later while practicing (and practicing) Le Paul's "Hop Spread," I felt my left hand relax in a way it never had before.

Suddenly, it was applying precisely the amount of pressure required to accomplish the move and nothing more. The minimum amount of effort required.

For the very first time since I began exploring card technique, it did not feel so much like I was executing the move as I was coaxing or even inspiring the cards themselves to perform the move.

It may sound a little surreal and certainly very Zen, but it was as if my hands had finally stopped trying to impose their will and "make" things happen, and instead, were flowing in a less stressful direction as a result of a new relationship with the objects.

Gravity, the weight and density of a pack of cards, the bone structure of your hand and many other factors exist as "givens" before you begin the execution of a move. For years my own hands were like slave drivers trying to bend everything to their will.

And of course, with enough practice, I had some success with this approach. But after I felt my hands loosen their grip and acquire a lighter, minimal touch, it was as if they had shifted their attitude from domineering to partnering, resulting in an experience that feels more like dancing with the objects than making them move.

At magic conventions and lectures, magicians often ask me to critique their Classic Pass or coin vanish and time and again I find myself taking hold of their wrists and gently saying, "Relax."

However, as sincerely helpful as I am trying to be, I am not sure there are any short cuts when it comes to the development of the relationship between you, your hands and your props.

It takes the time it takes. You will undoubtedly experience your own unique breakthroughs when it is time and not a moment before.

However, keep the "minimum effort" approach in mind as you polish the skills you already possess and learn new ones.

Over time, such an approach will nurture grace and fluidity in your work that will in turn dramatically increase its deceptiveness.

Even more importantly, it will also increase the joy you experience while both practicing and performing.

## PERFORMER AS PRODUCT

*"Advertising may be described as the science of arresting human intelligence long enough to get money from it." – Stephen Leacock*

The most effective promotion and advertising is a direct expression of your performing character. Ideally, promotion serves as a compelling bridge between your craft and your target market.

Every tiny detail of this information bridge should reflect your character. This includes the font of the text, promotional slogans, corporate quotes, letters of recommendation and above all else, your photos and the colors of your promo package.

More than any other aspect of your promotional package, these images and colors will establish the all-important tone of your marketing.

Is your market young children? College students? Middle-aged corporate executives? Paranoid Swiss plumbers?

You must know the answers to these questions before you even begin putting together a package.

It is essential that you not only make these decisions regarding your image, style and target audience, but also that you fully commit to those decisions.

In our fear of "missing a potential market," we all too often try to appeal to an overly broad spectrum of markets and end up appealing to nobody in particular.



This kind of commitment phobia results from imagining dozens of doors closing rather than focusing on the handful of doors that will swing wide open if only we will have the courage to market ourselves in a decisive fashion.

In my early twenties, I worked as a copywriter in an advertising agency. I read voraciously, wanting to learn everything I could about the fascinating field of compelling communication. One of the first important ideas I encountered is called the AIDA principle (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action).

This idea is that first you must catch peoples' attention. Without that you have nothing. Getting this attention applies to every instance of communication you can imagine, from phoning a restaurant owner to asking a bus driver to stop and let you off.

Next, to promote yourself you must inspire interest. After all, any idiot can stand naked on chair and shout at the top of his lungs "I love salami! I love salami!" and though he will surely get people's attention, he will also merely annoy them. Interest is inspired only if it is something that people sincerely care about.

Then comes desire, the fuel behind action. People only reach toward a thing or try to make it happen if it is something they desire. Without desire, they will not act. And action is the end goal of the entire process.

In this case, you want to inspire them to book you! Ultimately, you must align your need to be booked with the unique needs of your target market. Only when you are able to effectively communicate the interdependence of these needs will you be able to sell yourself to that market.

Another powerful idea I learned during my days in advertising is something called the "unique selling point" (often referred to as the USP). This is especially relevant to the marketing of performers in an industry where "brand loyalty" is very weak.

People tend to think of magicians as somewhat all the same, but with the USP approach, you can market yourself in a way that directly combats that assumption. You must ask yourself, "What is unique about what I have to offer?" This unique quality must also have evident value for your target market. If your first thought is, "There is nothing particularly unique about what I do. I do some card tricks and coin tricks and I'm a nice guy," don't be discouraged. I can guarantee you that you are wrong.

You have many unique qualities; you just have to shift your perspective! Do not just consider obvious things like your "look" and performance style. Instead, sit down and write out everything you can think about yourself. Your age, educational background, employment history, cultural background, everything!

Do you do charity work? Do you speak a second language? Are you athletic? All of these not only differentiate you from your competitors (other magicians), but can even guide you into entirely new markets that you would have never considered.

For example, if you once worked as a manager in a store, you can promote yourself to corporations as "the magician who really understands the corporate environment."

If you were on the basketball team at college, why not try marketing your services to a string of sporting stores or even a large sporting goods manufacturer?

If you have three children, consider promoting yourself to the birthday party market as "the magician with kids of his own."

Obviously these are broad strokes that need to be refined so that they perfectly express what it is you have to offer and what it is your target market will find of value. Look for that all-important overlap between your experiences, qualities and skill set and the needs of your target market.

Then express those two things as simply and as dramatically as possible through your promotional package. The great thing about this approach is that your package will not be filled with run-of-the-mill magic endorsements that any magician could use. Those may generate a little business, but in the long term it is business suicide.

Finally, our present society is very impressed with information and education. Given that, one of the easiest ways to add something of substance to your "marketing mix" is to take a handful of courses at your nearest college.

Having a marketing or business course under your belt will appeal to potential corporate clients, just as a course on childhood education would appeal to the birthday party market.

Is this absolutely necessary? No, but if you are serious about making your living through magic, you must be prepared to invest more time and money than just making your weekly trip to the magic shop.

## WHAT IS THE MAGIC ABOUT?

*"Houdini's first magic act was called 'Metamorphosis.' It was never just a question of escape. It was also a question of transformation." – Michael Chabon*

"I slipped your signed card in the center of the pack, but now it is in my pocket. Watch carefully. I'll do it again." To avoid this kind of redundant, uncreative and dull scripting and at the same time present a script that is truly relevant to the effect, it is always a good idea to ask yourself, "What's the effect about?"

For example, when you have a card selected, returned to the pack and you attempt to find it, the trick is ideally not about "finding the card."

Finding the card is merely a means, the mannequin if you will, upon which you drape the clothes of the effect.

The clothes might be "challenge the magician" or they might be "a demonstration of ancient sleight-of-hand" or, if the card is signed, something about uniqueness having "a way of revealing itself."

Granted, these are extremely simple examples, but they still highlight the idea that when we consider what an effect is "about," we are considering its theme or plot rather than the brute events.

The Zombie is a fine example. To present such a lovely effect as, "look, I can make this silver ball float" is to fail to tap into any one of a thousand dormant themes lying in wait just below the surface.

Establishing what a routine is “about” is also one of the best ways to bring your own creativity to the routine because it requires you to interpret the happenings for yourself, then share your interpretation with your audience.

As fascinating as a floating ball or a vanishing coin can be, it is your original interpretation that brings the trick to life, giving it relevance and meaning.

The problem with merely descriptive presentations is that they fail to establish any kind of relationship between the effect and anything else in the world, including the performer and his audience.

No effect is inherently merely a trick or puzzle, but descriptive presentations invariably reduce the effect to that trite level. It is always best to develop a plot or theme that strikes you personally as organic, i.e. as growing directly out of the effect itself.

## ENTHUSIASM

*"Unless I feel something, I can't sing." Billie Holiday*

Just as it is essential to be yourself onstage, it is equally important to perform the magic that you personally find exciting. Your own belief in the material and your enthusiasm about the effects is the most important fuel you will ever have as a performer.

Like laughter and yawning, enthusiasm is contagious and if you are not excited about your magic, how can you reasonably expect the audience to be?

However, by enthusiasm I do not mean yelling your script or waving your arms around as if you can barely control yourself. More often than not, that kind of behavior will only distract from your magic.

The kind of enthusiasm I have in mind is more about intensity, focus and commitment. And how are you supposed to be able to do all that if you yourself do not much like the effects?

So no matter what tricks are in vogue, and no matter what the magicians at the local club suggest, stick to the effects that you really like.

That is the best way to honor your own magic sensibilities while also accessing the emotional fuel needed for great performances.

## FEWER WORDS, MORE MAGIC

*"Observe the wonders as they occur around you. Don't claim them. Feel the artistry moving through and be silent." – Rumi*

*"Words, as is well known, are great foes of reality." – Joseph Conrad*

Have you ever noticed how the longer you perform an effect the shorter the verbal presentation becomes? Of course, this is not always the case, especially for performers who do magic mostly to have an opportunity to talk with people (or perhaps just at them).

For myself, I have found that after years of performing an effect, the script often becomes pared down to a "fighting weight" with literally every syllable only there because it adds a great deal to the effect.

Mind you, sometimes the reverse is true, especially with routines that lend themselves to humor. In such cases, a line gets added here, two more lines get added there and before you know it, a card-to-pocket routine is eight minutes long with over a dozen really strong laugh moments.

But generally speaking, I have found that most scripts are far more likely to be too long than too short. This is why editing is so very important.

Short, powerful scripts are extremely pragmatic because they allow you to perform more magic in a shorter period, and they leave your magic greater opportunity to speak for itself.

When scripting an effect, I always ask myself about editing and replacing. By editing I mean, "Does this sentence or word really need to be said? Does it add to the proceedings?"

And when replacing, I consider possible substitutes for the word such as a gesture or even a sound effect, i.e. a click of the tongue, a popping sound, etc. (I do a variation of the Sands rope routine only whistling from start to finish). It is amazing just how creative your communication can become when you passionately apply yourself to editing your scripts.



## SECRECY IS FEAR

*"Without courage wisdom bears no fruit." – Baltasar Gracian*

"Never reveal the secret to the trick." This is the First Commandment we each learned, often within moments of learning the mechanics behind our first trick.

The First Commandment was not "Love magic," "Practice every day," "Be original," or "The tricks are mere vehicles." Rather, it was about keeping secrets to ourselves.

I am reminded of Pat Conroy's wonderful book *The Prince of Tides* and how the mother in the story separately confided in each of her three children, "You are my favorite," and then swore each to secrecy.

An ingenious and heinous way to keep the children both bound to her and divided from each other on a deep emotional level.

As magi, our obsession with secrecy has not kept us divided from each other. On the contrary, I find magicians to be the friendliest and most closely knit community I have ever had the good fortune to be a part of.

However, our attitudes regarding secrecy have kept us apart from the majority of other artistic communities on the planet, and those same attitudes perpetuate widespread prejudice, ignorance and a lack of respect for our art.

This passionate commitment to secrecy is in no small part also responsible for the rampant theft, scarcity of originality and mediocre level of performance plaguing our global community.

This secrecy is no true brotherhood nor measure of artistry, and the mechanics we are in such a rush to keep hidden have nothing to do with what makes what we do an art.

Too many magicians are afraid that, "if we give away the secrets we'll have nothing left!" The secrets are among the least artistic and most impersonal aspects of our craft.

But of course, if all you have are the secrets, if you have not honed your skills, tended the love of your craft, developed your performance character or nurtured your creativity, then you may have nothing other than secrets.

In this case, you are not a magician. You are a librarian or a collector or a consumer. There is nothing wrong with that, but do not confuse yourself with a magician.

Just as a magician's guilt about a movement only serves to draw the audience's attention to that same action, so too does our obsession with keeping secrets only serve to draw attention to the brute mechanics behind our routines.

Perhaps one day, as a community, we will shift our focus to the more transcendent elements of our craft and, not surprisingly, the focus of the general public will shift accordingly. This is the opposite of "exposing" in that telling people about roughing fluid does not teach them a damn thing about our art.

It only leaves the person with precisely enough trivial knowledge so that he is unable to enjoy a performance of the Invisible Deck and not a whiff of the understanding required to appreciate a stellar performance of that same trick.

To expose without educating is to do everyone on both sides of the footlights a grave disservice and to impoverish all involved.

Callous and exploitive acts of exposure are no better than the toy collectors who buy tricks, practice them twice, perform them once and call themselves "magicians." Instead of ignoble exposure, why not try to rise to the challenge of education?

There are so many wonderful aspect of the art of magic that people would find intriguing and enriching. The psychology of misdirection, the challenges of script writing, the philosophy of performance, the many parallels between magic and acting, film, painting and dance, the beauty of sleight-of-hand and, of course, the fascinating history of our craft.

The general public has heard of Spielberg, Van Gogh, Michelangelo and Chopin. Why not Vernon, Slydini, Houdin, Takagi, Harris, Marlo, Tenkai, Ascanio, Tamariz and Kaps?

The cult of secrecy is a parasite curled up at the base of the spine of magic, forever feeding, draining each of us, keeping us in the dark, cut off from the world and so much smaller than we could be.

The blood flowing through the veins of the art of magic does not consist of the small material secrets behind a parade of tricks. Its blood consists of far more profound stuff, and it is these immaterial aspects that we would do well to share with our audiences in an unprecedented fashion.

Let us draw to magic ardent fans, humble students and knowledgeable aficionados and, at the same time, shake out the fakes, exploiters and the uninspired.

We have kept both the bath water and the baby locked away in the closet for too long. Let us share the beautiful baby and let the dark stale bath water drain away.

## THE ART OF PRACTICE

*"Put your heart, mind, intellect and soul even to the smallest acts. This is the secret of success." – Swami Sivananda*

Your practice should be mindful in direct proportion to how well your mind, hands and body are unfamiliar with the movement. In other words, when you are first learning a sleight you should completely focus on the particulars.

Then as the particulars become smoother, gently shift your focus to the overall look and rhythm of the sleight.

Only by being extremely mindful at the beginning of this learning curve will you be able to avoid developing any number of bad habits.

Later, as the movements become second nature and you are confident that you do them well (i.e., gracefully and deceptively), make a point of deliberately relaxing your focus and awareness of the movement.

This second phase of "letting go" is as important as the first phase of learning and can be likened to removing training wheels from a bike. Now that you know how to ride, they can only get in the way.

## INSIDE OUT/OUTSIDE IN

*"The function of the imagination is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange." – G.K. Chesterton*

One of the many defining qualities of a moment of magic is a surreal sense of otherworldliness, as if the usual laws of nature have temporarily been superseded or suspended.

In the hands of an artless performer, such moments can be confusing and even annoying, while in the hands of an inspired performer they can be thrilling and extremely entertaining. And in the hands of a master, these brief vacations from the mundane can be transcendent experiences bordering on the religious.

A dazzling revelation of hidden connections and astounding possibilities, as if an exotic animal, the likes of which we have only ever glimpsed in our dreams, has suddenly appeared at the dinner table.

In those precious moments, all the usual givens lose their footing and, freed from the grasp of the everyday, we are for a time free. Free to laugh, shudder, shout and dream.

Of course, the exotic is an inherently relative term in that a thing is only exotic within a certain context. For example, while a pineapple may well be extremely exotic at the North Pole, it is mundane in the Tropics.

This relative exoticness applies to magic in that we bring unusual events from outside our audiences' experience into a shared and temporary space.

We perform strange events with everyday objects and sometimes even perform strange events with strange objects.

However, for pure magic impact, there is usually no comparison between magic with strange objects and magic with everyday (ideally borrowed) objects.

More often than not, magic with everyday objects makes a more powerful impression on an audience because the suspicion of gimmicks is greatly reduced and the familiarity of the objects free the minds of spectators to focus one hundred percent of their attention on what happens with them.

Furthermore, if the objects are borrowed, the audience usually cares about the objects (and thus the effect) more than they would with, say, a small hand-painted box the magician removes from his pocket.

However, as always there are plenty of exceptions to such a general rule. For instance, if you remove a live mouse from your pocket or a roll of hundred dollar bills, there is a good chance the audience is going to be keenly interested.

## SUSPENDING DISBELIEF

*"Human kind cannot bear too much reality." T.S. Eliot*

The audience believes you are a professional magician. They believe that the card they selected was in fact a free choice and that the same card was fairly shuffled into the pack (after all, a spectator shuffled the pack).

They believe the card you removed from the pack was not their selected card. And a moment later, when you revealed that you were now holding their selection, they believe that it actually is the same card you held a moment before.

How they respond to this transformation largely depends upon the magician's performance of the effect, but none of this required a so-called "suspension of disbelief."

Close-up magic is different from theatre in that, while watching a play the audience on some level never for a moment believes the actor is actually a king named Lear or that anyone is killed during the play or even that there is real ale in those metal mugs.

Though of course, if while sitting in the theatre, the audience spent all their time thinking about the reality of the situation, they would not become emotionally involved and would miss out on much of the magic of a theatrical performance.

In contrast, close-up magic happens within inches of people's faces, often with borrowed objects and with the spectators themselves being actively involved.

But disbelief can still readily occur, especially if the performer makes poor character choices.

If you present yourself as a person who truly performs magic, not only are you a small-minded liar, you run a serious risk of being unbelievable.

However, if you present yourself as someone who merely pretends to perform magic, your audience will often believe you. Disbelief does not even enter into it.

As for the idea of a "willing suspension of disbelief," stellar close-up magic has a way of compelling people to believe. Not forcing, but strongly urging. In many effects, there is little doubt as to what happened.

As for the question of how it was accomplished, I think it takes a most willing audience to believe it was accomplished "by magic."

In light of the classic theory of suspending disbelief, I suggest you do not offer any implicit or explicit explanation as to "how" the effects were accomplished. Leave such questions with the audience.

Close-up magic is the rich emotional experience it is in no small part because unlike theatrical plays all the evidence points to the utter reality of the proceedings!

Certainly some people will either deny the more compelling obvious details (claiming that the card was not signed when in fact it was) or even resist the conclusion to which the obvious details point, taking refuge in the thought, "It's just a trick."

Many people however, experience an "inescapability" during a performance of inspired close-up magic such that the events will often resonate with them for years to come.



## RESPONDING

*"The most important thing I look for in a musician is whether he knows how to listen." Duke Ellington*

We have all watched a magician's consciousness shift to his hands as he attempts to get a break under the top two cards of the pack, or witnessed his attention nervously jump to the back corner of the room in response to someone knocking over a drink.

These are exits that, no matter how brief or understandable, nonetheless sever ties with the audience and break the spell.

Being present with all of yourself is an incredibly powerful kind of magic. It is also the only way to effectively invite your audience to in turn be fully present.

Part of being present is not just remaining focused as you perform your effects, but also responding to your audience and environment. I learned a great deal about this performing in comedy clubs.

I mentioned the example of a magician being distracted by someone knocking over a drink at the back of the room, but being distracted by something is very different than responding to it.

This is particularly the case if you are aware that many people in the audience also took note of the potential distraction.

If I am performing and a cellular phone rings, I will always make a point of at least commenting on it in passing.

Stand-up comics sometimes refer to it as, "calling the situation," and rather than sidetracking your performance it is actually one of the most effective ways of diffusing a potential focus breaker.

If I am in the middle of a line of script and the phone rings I will often comment that, "it's funny how whenever I say the phrase (the interrupted line of script) a cell phone rings." This gets a chuckle and I immediately continue with the script.

By "calling the situation" instead of ignoring the obvious interruption you will keep the audience with you. Responding and flowing with things as they unfold is precisely what being fully present is all about.

## PARADE OF CHARACTERS

*"Variety is the soul of pleasure." – Aphra Behn*

The world is weary of the bland, impersonal, tuxedo-clad magician making lame jokes and confusing his own odd interest in card tricks and manual dexterity with something people might actually find, not just entertaining, but relevant to their lives.

There are many ways we can go about changing this, but I very much doubt that any of us are going to chuck all our presentations and store-bought tricks in the trash and start over from a perspective of, "What are people's real concerns? What do they care about?"

However, within the Russian doll set of theatrical factors influencing a performance, there is one element in particular which we can each readily begin to work on and which will profoundly impact our magic: our characters.

There are essentially two types of characters. There is a Character, and then there is a character. Vito Lupo's mime clown is a Character. Max Maven's mentalist is a Character.

These are performers who sacrifice a certain kind of naturalness and credibility in exchange for enhanced theatrical impact.

They have a definite "look" and a demeanor which the audience rightly assumes these performers would not possess if they happened to bump into them on a bus. They are actors who are clearly playing the part of exaggerated, even "over the top" Characters.

The second kind of character (with a lower-case "c") is still an actor, but more subtle and toned down. Most experienced professional magicians are aware of how, just before they begin a performance, there is a shift in their energy.

And how, even just a few minutes into the show, this shift is expressed in the different way in which they move, speak and interact with their audience.

This second kind of character is not an obvious fabrication. Many in the audience would not be surprised if, when bumping into the magician on the street, he or she was pretty much the same on and offstage. These characters do not dress in an especially outlandish fashion. They seem to be "themselves."

It is interesting to note that there seems to be something about the art of magic that attracts armies of individuals who, after several years of practice and performance, all seem to embody much the same character.

This character is affable, polite and if not actually funny, sort of witty in a corny, pun-wielding way. This is largely a result of the minimal level of commitment and creativity required to walk into a shop, buy a few tricks and show them to friends and family a few days later.

This unoriginal character is also weaned on the uninspired and out-of-date patter lines included with most marketed routines.

Given all these factors, it is no surprise that many practitioners cling to the "standard magician character." Tragically, this only perpetuates an equally standardized audience experience. Yet of all theatrical forms, magic is so wonderfully suited for a wild range of characters!

With one foot in the everyday and the other in the surreal and unpredictable, such a contrast is the ideal breeding ground for a fascinating array of truly eclectic personas.

Imagine...the quietly frustrated magician who is elegant, mysterious, but obviously dissatisfied with the fact that, despite his years of work, he is still more human than spirit. Or the joyous magician, walking around in a love-filled haze, thrilled to his bones that there is magic in the world and that he is in touch with it.

Or the cranky magician who, while never breaking character, is very funny in that he is unimpressed with the awe of his audience and is forever threatening to storm off.

Then there could be the utterly insane magician, replete with mood swings, dark mumblings, bursts of humor and fury followed by waves of warmth and gentleness. How about an alien magician?

His manner, dress and language all strongly suggest that he is from...somewhere else. He looks like a human, but there is something just a little "off" with everything he says and does.

Or the anxious magician who is nervous and unsure, not due to a lack of belief in his abilities, but because he is meddling with powers he knows he does not fully understand. He is hesitant and needs support from the audience to move from wonder to wonder.

Where is this parade of marvelous and original characters?

## MIRRORING

*"My left hand tends to want to play straight-up melodies. My right hand wants to play too many notes. Somewhere in between it all comes together." -Bill Kirchen*

When the hands move together, mirroring each other, the audience's focus is divided between them. Actually, in my experience the audience's focus is not only divided, but at the same time diminished. It is a strange phenomenon, but if you try it I believe you will discover the same results.

When you gesture for a few beats with both hands so that they rightly mirror each other there is a lulling quality to the action, a kind of visual balancing of things, such that you can perform actions that would normally spark suspicion if the hands moved independently of each other.

For example, whenever I want to secretly get something out of my pants pocket and into my right hand, for example a coin, I lean forward slightly while talking to a spectator and at the same time smoothly slip both hands into their respective pockets.

After a few beats I slip them out of my pockets, each hand again mirroring each other, and I straighten up (the coin now palmed in my right hand). I will even adopt the same approach when switching decks or ditching a palmed object after an effect.

Also, be sure to move your hands so that they mirror each other even while palming an object such as a coin or a card. Instead of bringing twice the focus to your hands, you will find that, paradoxically, your hands will attract less focus.

To further appreciate how effective this technique can be, try slipping just one of your hands into a pocket or gesturing with one hand while the other remains at your side.

You will find that the individual hand in motion will attract a fair bit of attention. Of course, gesturing with only one hand can be a very powerful means of directing the audience's attention, but during moments when you are more interested in diffusing focus rather than directing attention, be sure to explore the mirroring technique.

## TAKING IT PERSONALLY

*"Don't wrestle with a pig. You both get dirty but the pig likes it." -  
Traditional Saying*

I have had more than a few engagements all but ruined by rude, self-centered, disrespectful and even mean-spirited people.

Just as not everyone puts a premium on being polite and acting in a manner that reflects consideration for other people's feelings, not everyone enjoys magic.

We have all had the experience of approaching a group of people, introducing ourselves as a magician, and immediately sensing that the last thing in the world these people want to experience is magic.

In those moments, I often feel as if we are all stuck together in a trap I unintentionally sprung. It's as if, instead of introducing myself as a magician, I had just introduced myself as a professional frog swallower.

Blessedly, some individuals have the emotional resources, the manners and the sensitivity to say something like, "Thanks very much, but we are actually in the middle of a discussion right now. Maybe you could come back later."

I never push magic on people. I want them to feel comfortable, and that includes feeling comfortable enough to say, "No thanks" (consent is essential for all healthy social interaction).

But I admit, it always hurts my feelings a tiny bit and for just a moment, it leaves me feeling annoyed, misunderstood and a little embarrassed. Also, a little like a failure.



It's as if the reason they were not interested in my magic is because I failed to charm them with my intro and it is all my fault.

Intellectually, I understand how skewed this interpretation is, but "the little boy inside me" nonetheless experiences these feelings.

However, as impolite, abrupt, aggressive, disrespectful and even abusive people can be, it is not about you.

It is about other people's limited relationship to magic and who they think you are. The bottom line is that they often do not know any better and are typically feeling nervous or threatened.

Over twelve years ago, when I was just starting out as a stand-up comic, I performed in this decidedly rough bar.

I was supposed to perform for about ten minutes (which, back then, was as much time as I was able to do, even when the audience was "with me"), but by the time I took the stage, one of the other comics had yet to arrive at the venue.

So the M.C. kept signaling me to stretch out my time. I did my best, but I was floundering from the start and by the time I hit the twenty-five minute mark I was an emotional wreck. I had been loudly bombing for close to twenty minutes!

I had long run out of even my B-grade material and had spent the last ten minutes stumbling through some stream-of-consciousness stuff, trying to find something, anything the surly crowd might find even vaguely amusing.

When I finally limped off stage, shell-shocked and covered in sweat, a kind-hearted veteran comic took me aside and gave me this very wise advice, "Instead of scrambling to try to please the audience, stick to what you do, to what you enjoy.

The best you can hope to do is hang your sign straight. Do what you do, as best as you can, and the audience will either enjoy it or they won't." Inspiring words.

## MULTIPLE CLIMAXES

*"In my beginnings, is my end." - T.S. Eliot*

As magicians, we have a tendency to gild the lily, to want to make a fine effect even finer, and in the process make a muddle of things.

Many of the effects I created as a younger magician suffer from precisely that ailment, a malady which I believe often has romantic roots. Actually, as a whole I experience magicians as a decidedly romantic group, myself included.

We are guided by dreams of "the magician and the awestruck audience," and while the passion of these imaginings may well be the fuel behind the creation of countless wonderful routines and heartfelt performances, if not tempered with some serious thought and experienced craft this romanticism can lead to extremely ineffective magic.

Double and triple climaxes are a perfect example. Not that I am against them or think they reflect weak craft, just that they require a sense of timing and theatre not easily acquired. Time and again I have watched magicians not give the first climax its due, and instead rush ahead to the second.

This not only waters down the first surprise, it can even result in confusion simply because the audience was not allowed the necessary time to fully appreciate the first climax.

And considering that most second climaxes are extensions of the first, without the time to process the first, the audience's relationship to the second is undermined.

Even when the performer gives the first climax enough time to register with the spectators/participants, there is still the issue of the degree to which the magician himself commits to the first surprise. So this is not just a matter of timing, but also energy and focus.

Then there is the challenge of presenting the second climax in the wake of the first. Reveal it too soon and you step on the toes of the first.

Reveal it too late and the rhythm of the routine is compromised. Of the two scenarios, the second is preferable because it runs less chance of confusing the audience, though ideally you should honor the first then reveal the second in just such a way as to ride the wave of wonder created by the first.

In my mind, the best moment to reveal the second climax is, not at the very peak of the shock created by the first, but rather a beat or two after the peak, just as the thrill is on “its way down.” That way, the second climax gooses the wonder factor, transporting the audience to an even deeper sense of awe.

Finally, there is the question of whether or not two climaxes presented so closely together have a tendency to dull each other’s corners and mute the impact of both.

Certainly it seems that many of the most memorable effects in magic are extremely simple, including card on ceiling, bill in lemon and the floating assistant. Very few of the classic effects of magic have more than one climax.

However, as I have already mentioned, I am not arguing against multiple climaxes. These are simply words of caution. More is not necessarily better, and in fact, more tends to include increased artistic challenges and theatrical risks.

## VIVID LANGUAGE

*"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." – Ludwig Wittgenstein*

As a community of mechanically-focused hobbyists, it is not surprising that many of us do not put a great deal of thought into the language of our scripts.

But when you take a moment to step back and really consider such popular phrases as, "Pick a card," "Watch carefully," and "Please hold onto this," they seem strikingly dull, even robotic.

Fortunately, none of us has to be Shakespeare to bring a bit more life to our language. We merely have to think about it and do it!

Language is an extremely personal thing. In fact, it is one of the easiest ways you can choose to express your uniqueness, and the chances are that, if you are reading this sentence you have a relatively large vocabulary.

However, I am certainly not urging you to adopt overly ornate language, e.g. "Fellow Creature, I beseech thee, please be so gracious as to extend your right hand towards this humble collection of multi-colored, die-cut sections of cardboard such that you are able to actually, and in reality, select but one from among the great many."

Language choices cannot be divorced from the issues of character and venue. For example, you might like the idea of performing as a rather rough, even somewhat rude person. (Frankly, I would love to see more of that in magic.

We have spent far too long pretending to be friendly, polite, tidy, emotionally repressed "vanilla performers!") But the hitch is that a rather brusque, rude persona would be a very hard "sell" in many corporate environments. It also may not suit you.

Mind you, most of us employ a variety of languages depending upon context, so the question remains, "How can I develop a language specifically suited to the performance of magic?"

For starters, effective performance scripts tend to be more emotional than intellectual. Again, performing styles vary, and it would be a grave mistake to try to be someone you are not, but if two equally proficient magicians perform for the same crowd, and one is more intellectual while the other is more emotional, I would wager that most of the time it will be the latter performer whom the audience enjoys more.

While people respond to expressions of joy, excitement, humor and drama, intellectual appeals will often leave an audience feeling a little cold. Ask yourself, would you rather an audience think you are a good magician or feel completely enthralled by your performance?

Of course, the energy you put into your character will in no small part determine the tone of your show, but your word choice can also go a long way towards developing a more emotional than intellectual approach.

But here is the catch. Most of us find it considerably easier to talk about what we think than what we feel, and unless you are prepared to invest some authentic emotion into your show, there is no point choosing emotional language. It will just come across as phony.

What do I mean by “emotional language?” Professional actors are of course able to say pretty much anything and imbue their words with a range of emotions.

Still, some sentences seem to lend themselves more readily to an emotional investment.

Here are five very different ways to ask a spectator to do the same thing:

*"Pick a card."*

*"Choice is destiny, choose yours."*

*"Prend une carte. That's French for pick a card."*

*"Go ahead. You know what to do."*

*"Go ahead, pick your nose. I mean, pick a card."*

As the emotional component varies, so will the responses.

Consider the difference between, "Pick a card" and "Touch whichever card you feel drawn to." Yes, "pick a card" is much simpler (and simplicity is a powerful guide towards inspired performances), but the second phrase is far more engaging by making explicit reference to the sensual ("touch"), the spectator ("you") and even the invisible relationships that are the lifeblood of the idea of magic ("drawn to.") Vivid language has a way of bringing effects to life.

It is also essential for a script to suit the performer (unless you are a comedy act)! We have all seen young magicians use lines of patter that were completely inappropriate, though not all errors in judgment are so obvious.

In stand-up comedy, I learned the simple rule of thumb that, if you do not talk a certain way offstage, you probably should not talk that way onstage.

There are plenty of exceptions to this rule, but unless you are a trained actor, you would do well to stick to your own everyday language. When performing be sure to make the very most of your language!

For your language choices to be suitable, you must have a strong sense of what is comfortable for you. At the same time, you have to develop a sense of the degree to which you want your language to play a part in your performance.

I have seen marvelous performers who speak very little, and more commonly, absolutely dreadful magicians who speak far too much.

If you stick with language that suits you, your audience will experience you as natural and authentic, two of the most powerful allies in theatre.

Performance scripts should also be as brief as possible. This does not mean you cannot develop the "bookish, poetic character with the antiquated language and the dung brown wig" you have always dreamed of, just that, even when you want to deliver a long script about the mating rituals of crickets (while naturally covering four coins with four cards), cut out any unnecessary words.

Powerful language is also specific. As slight as it is, even the difference between "Hold the coin" and "Hold this coin as tightly as you can" can add a lot to your magic.



Make explicit reference to whatever is around you, including the people, the performance space, your props and yourself. The more you do that, the more you "ground" your magic in the here and now, and the more powerful it will be as a result.

Though emotional language tends to be more engaging than factual, effective magic scripts are also informative. By this, I simply mean: do not say the obvious.

The classic example is referring to your open, obviously empty hand as "my empty hand." As an amateur cartoonist, I learned the powerful idea that the caption beneath the cartoon should never repeat whatever information is contained in the image above it.

Instead, the caption should only add to that information. Thus, the caption and image fit together like a lock and key, perfectly complimenting each other while also being wonderfully efficient.

Think about that kind of fat-free communication as you develop a script to accompany your actions during a routine, so that if you want to draw attention to the complete lack of anything in your hand, do so in a way that adds something to the performance.

One of my favorite ways to do this very thing is to take a second to compare hand sizes with one of the spectators by holding my hand palm-out and asking her to do the same.

It is a fine opportunity for comedy, connection and interaction while clearly conveying the information that my hand is undeniably empty.

Many of my scripting preferences reflect my experience as a close-up magician and may well be less applicable to stage magic.

This might be especially the case in regards to what I call "loose scripting." As an intimate entertainer, I welcome interruptions and in fact treat them as valuable additions.

Loose scripting works in a variety of ways to bring life to your performance. It sends a subtle message of strength and confidence to your audience while also giving you both room to interact and create a truly intimate space, if only for a few moments.

The inherent flexibility of such scripts also allow for improvised dialogue which, as most experienced performers will attest to, can be some of the most memorable moments of a performance.

Finally, strong magic scripts should frame your effects. Your words do not interpret the performance for your audience. Your audience interprets everything for themselves.

But your words powerfully guide that interpretation, which is why your words are such a profoundly important part of your performance. Not just for the sake of connection and character, but also for the magic.

A classic example of how your words can influence your audience's experience of the magic is when a performer has someone peek at a card in the pack and then a few moments later asks, "So you are merely thinking of a card, right?"

Thanks to such verbal framing, the selection has moved from the physical plane (peeking at a card) to the immaterial (thinking of a card).

What you say before, during and after a routine should not only support the proceedings, but also subtly frame the events so as to gently coax the audience towards a maximum magic interpretation.

Ultimately, I am not suggesting you use any of the examples given here. I am really just trying to get you thinking a little bit about the wealth of exciting possibilities regarding your language choices.

A little less time working on that nifty flourish and a little more time thinking about what you want to say and how you want to say it will yield amazing results

## THE NATURAL

*"It is a great ability to be able to conceal one's ability." – La Rochefoucauld*

Within magic circles, we take it as an indisputable given that we should perform our effects as "naturally" as possible. Many of the great thinkers of magic have insisted upon the importance of naturalness, especially in regards to manual technique. But what exactly is it about being natural that is so desirable?

Of course, as with most things, "natural" is a relative term. What is perfectly natural for one person may be utterly unnatural for another. Many of the techniques Tony Slydini created were so marvelously deceptive because they were organic extensions of his own unique gestures, timing, temperament and personality.

The same cannot be said of Slydini's students. Though some even sound quite a lot like the master himself, the gestures and words simply do not ring true (avid video and DVD's viewers take heed).

This may be one of the hallmarks of a master magician. Despite years of study, there is just no performing the effects he performs in the way he performs them. His craft is truly self-expressive.

And yet, personal idiosyncrasies aside, there still seem to be general guidelines as to what appears natural for a human being when it comes to handling a pack of cards, holding a coin or unfolding a handkerchief.

Ultimately, when we refer to an action performed by a magician as "natural," we mean that it suits him, seems second nature and appears to be organic rather than contrived. But the question still remains, "What is it about naturalness that is so desirable for a magician?"

First, an action that appears to be natural does not arouse suspicion. For magicians, this is a very valuable attribute. At the same time, natural actions do not call attention to themselves and/or distract the audience.

Such distraction can lead, not only to suspicion, but also to confusion which will undermine the understanding and final impact of the effect.

Handling your props and delivering your script in a fashion that seems to perfectly suit you is also a wonderful way to nurture your audience's trust. Such trust dramatically increases the chances of you being able to deceive them as well as inspire them to become emotionally involved in the show.

And assuming that what is natural for you is natural for your audience, the chances are very good that by acting naturally your audience will also be able to relate to what you are doing.

Finally, there is a virtue to naturalness that I find especially potent: grace. There is a simple elegance and efficiency, a kind of visual music, to actions performed in an utterly natural fashion.

John Carney is a marvelous example of just this kind of benchmark technique. It is as if the performer is tuned to the perfect wavelength for his being and to be in the presence of that cannot help but add considerably to the beauty of the experience.

## EXPRESSING AND COMMUNICATING

*"The real work involves unleashing the things within you, and repressing the things that you don't need." Daniel Day-Lewis*

Your magic is artistic to the degree to which it is self-expressive and there are countless creative means to express yourself through even a single effect.

And just as it is important for you to be familiar with a variety of dependable techniques, effects and presentations, so too is it important for you to be aware of your own thoughts and feelings.

This includes your personal values, aesthetics, politics, preferences and performance goals, i.e. your own answer to the question: "Why do I perform magic?"

One of the paradoxes of art-making, especially within the performance arts, is that the artist must possess a kind of dual awareness of both his own self as well as how he is perceived. Expressing what is "inside" while being conscious of how he is experienced "from the outside."

Craft is the bridge between these two very different forms of awareness. Without craft (skills based in understanding and honed over time) the magician only has his thoughts, feelings and unmediated attempts at communicating. Craft is that missing mediator.

Not that you need craft to express yourself any more than a dog needs training to bark or an infant needs to be taught to cry when hungry. But to effectively communicate requires a dramatic shift in intention.

While expressing deals with the relationship between what you feel and what you do, communicating is about what you feel and how you want others to understand you.

You might argue that some of history's great artists had no interest whatsoever in communicating and were solely focused on following their own muses, and so why put a premium on being understood by others.

First, I believe that when it comes to performance art you will find very few artists who are uninterested in communicating (performing = performing for someone = communication). And second, a yearning for communication, literally a thirst to commune, is able to yield one of the most profound sources of empowerment a performer can access: audience response.

## SUSPICION

*"To him who is afraid everything rustles." – Sophocles*

Once roused, suspicion is a beast not easily quieted. Think of the beginning of a routine as the beginning of a song played on the piano. The first few notes fill the air and the sound is engaging.

Momentum and direction begin to bloom, then, "What was that?" A note out of key or strangely played or something we perhaps cannot quite put our finger on, but whatever the case we are distracted.

The spell is broken, and even if, a moment later, the steady train of the song finds its way back onto the tracks of the original melody, the disquieting experience lingers. Suspicion is like this.



## MIND OVER MATTER

*"Five senses; an incurably abstract intellect; a haphazardly selective memory. How much of total reality can such an apparatus let through?" C.S. Lewis*

Dai Vernon theorized that if you can remove a sleight from a routine, you have more than likely improved it. This usually requires rethinking the handling and perhaps even considering the effect in an entirely new light.

One of my favorite examples of the power of the mind over matter (the "matter" being physical feats of manual dexterity) involves the Classic Pass. Imagine you have a short card on the bottom of the pack, the deck is resting on the table and you ask a spectator to cut his own card into the center of the pack.

Now imagine that after many years of practice you are so astonishingly adept with a pack of cards that you are able to pick up the deck, obtain a break above the selection (thanks to the short card) and pass the card to the top of the pack in an instant.

Even better, imagine that your pass is absolutely invisible and, just for the sake of argument, let us even suppose it is utterly angle proof.

In that case, you are able to pick up the pack, execute an undetectable sleight, and return the pack to the table without creating even the tiniest of ripples across the surface of Lake Suspicion. Consequently, it appears to the audience that all you did was pick up the deck for a moment then put it down.

Yet, with the right psychology and theatrical direction, you can leave the audience with the impression that you never even picked up the pack. This is the power of mind over matter.

Just as the imaginations of our spectators/participants are able to create effects more astonishing than many effects we are actually capable of creating, inspired presentations and intelligent routining can create an experience far beyond anything our hands are capable of producing.

## WHAT IS A NARRATIVE?

*"You can't make a living from telling the truth." – Ian Sansom*

All too often, magicians think of narrative in terms of a "story," typically involving a hodgepodge of pseudo-scientific babble, the infidelity of kings and queens or the sweaty Uncle who "taught them their first trick."

Yes, these are examples of narrative, but you do not need seventy-five words to tell a story. You do not even need a single word.

All you need is a clear idea of a set-up and an outcome, and a means of expressing this clear idea. In the final analysis, narrative outlines one or more relationships.

Of course, many theorists insist that a narrative (read "story") must have a beginning, middle, and an end, as well as a sense of resolution and an emotional arc.

While these requirements make a great deal of sense in regards to a full-blown story (even a very short story), I do not think, strictly speaking, a coin vanish requires a sense of resolution.

(Some will argue that just by reproducing the coin the performer offers a sense of resolution, but this confuses psychological release with narrative resolution.)

The result of many magicians having an overly complicated idea of the word "narrative," an idea too closely associated with that of "story," is that magicians often end up in one of two absurd camps.

One camp is filled with performers who are forever struggling to saddle every gesture and phase of a routine with an ornate "meaningful script" resulting in entire repertoires of contrived, dull, long-winded and even laughable presentations, e.g., "The Jack of Hearts was down on his luck so he asked his drinking buddy the Two of Clubs for advice."

And the other camp of magicians performs effects with such perfunctory, descriptive, bald and unemotional patter that their effects are experienced by their audiences as nothing more than minor intellectual challenges and somewhat amusing tricks.

What both of these approaches lack is authentic personal investment on the part of the performer. To avoid the horrors of a life sentence in either vapid camp, each of us must find a way, our own way, to imbue our effects with meaning, not like make-up applied with a trowel to a skull, but rather like uncovering buried treasure.

Share something that is real and vital for you through the effect. Without this, we are little more than wind-up toys in top hats. "Pick a card, pick a card, pick a card . . ."

## MAGIC AND MENTALISM

*"Consistency is contrary to nature, contrary to life. The only completely consistent people are the dead." – Aldous Huxley*

Think of the archetype of Merlin the Magician. Can you see him waving a wand over a cauldron causing sparks to burst forth?

How about changing a stone into a frog? And finally, can you imagine him revealing another person's thoughts or foretelling an event? For me, all of these abilities are from the same family, especially as embodied in a character such as Merlin.

There is much talk these days of the differences between magic and mentalism, though ultimately it all boils down to your stage character and performance goals.

So-called "inconsistencies" are not only commonly found in real people, but are precisely what makes a person real!

Perfectly consistent mannerisms with an unflagging devotion to a single identity or outlook are the stuff of romance novels and children's stories.

As dissimilar as you may find mentalism and magic to be, there are countless ways to successfully combine the two in such a way that an audience finds your character credible.

One of the keys to creating an effective character is a certain degree of consistency in regards to voice, mannerisms, demeanor and apparent motivations, but as I have already suggested, you can take consistency too far and create an artificial persona rather than a believable individual.

If you perform a number of flourishes with a pack of cards, then have someone select a card, return it to the pack and announce that you will find the card with "mind reading," you may be pushing your luck.

If the audience has to choose between believing that you will find their card via techniques you have already demonstrated (sleight-of-hand) or via mysterious powers, they are going to be sorely tempted to choose to believe the prior.

And make no mistake, belief is a choice. Mentalism and magic, the immaterial and the material, the cognitive and the sensual, are all able to beautifully complement each other, though you must combine them in a manner sensitive to their differences.

Ultimately, the goal is to be mindful that the explicitness of magic and the implicitness of mentalism do not undermine each other.

One way to distinguish the two is through your use of props. If you have presented a few effects under the theatrical awning of "card tricks," instead of using the pack for a mentalism effect, put the cards away and do something with a borrowed bill, pen and paper, etc.

You can also distinguish the two through routining, traditionally by beginning with a magic effect or two and then ending your set with a mentalist effect.

This works nicely in that it moves from the sensual and public (a selected card everyone sees) to the more abstract and private (a thought-of number).

That way, you and your audience have a chance to develop a bit of trust and comfort through the visual and tactile before steering the collective boat into more implicit waters.

Presentational style is, of course, another way to distinguish between magic and mentalism. Typically, mentalist presentations have a decidedly more minimal tone to them, but this does not mean they have to be cold or clinical.

This is a mistake made by far too many mentalists. By adopting a "serious, objective, test conditions" tone, they may gain a certain degree of focus and establish a shift in character, but they also run a serious risk of lessening the audience's emotional investment.

There are so many attitudes to adopt other than the clichéd, unsmiling and monotone, "look deeply into my eyes" stuff. In stark contrast to the classic magician-in-control demeanor, when I perform a mentalist effect I strive to get in touch with a more vulnerable and even uncertain side of myself. This is a version of the popular, "Let's try something, I'm not sure if it is going to work" approach. It nicely supports an implicit lack of control while also keeping the emotional channels wide open between you and your audience.

A memorable example of an extremely insecure character presenting a mentalist effect ("Do As I Do") is found in the movie *Magic* (1978) directed by Richard Attenborough and starring Anthony Hopkins.

The magician's presentation is definitely "over the top" in a creepy and desperate kind of way, though it is without a doubt totally engaging. I do not believe it would be a very commercial character or tone to adopt, but it is a fine example of a magical effect performed in an extremely vulnerable fashion.

## VULNERABILITY

*"The English language with its elaborate generosity, distinguishes between the naked and the nude. To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes and the word implies some of the embarrassment which most of us feel in that condition. The word nude, on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous and confident body." - Kenneth Clark*

*"Fear can give you an extraordinary energy. Don't refuse it: learn to employ it. Try to turn it into its positive form: theatrical excitement." - Yoshi Oida*

Like catnip to a cat, audiences absolutely love the experience of being "let inside" during a performance, of having the performer abandon his or her well-prepared script and go off on a tangent, allowing the show to take an unexpected turn in response to something the audience either says or does.

Spectators find this enormously flattering, empowering and thrilling, and it creates a marvelous sense of intimacy between the audience and performer because it seems that the magician is truly "just being himself."

Of course, masters are able to create the appearance of spontaneity night after night, but as effective as they can very well be, in my experience it seldom generates the same amount of "electricity in the air" as when the performer actually leaves his script behind. But why do we not see more magicians doing it?



Because for the uninspired there is a very serious risk of losing the audience and quickly finding yourself panicked and frantically trying to regain that all-important connection.

I am reminded of an article I once read about when two animals of the same species meet in the wilds. Assuming neither animal is in heat or feeling threatened, they often engage in a very complicated "dance" during which they take turns revealing a little bit more of their neck and stomachs to each other.

Given the mortal risk of leaving themselves wide open for a lethal blow, the dance represents a profound and burgeoning trust between the two creatures. The relationship between yourself and your audience is no different and I suggest you be as proactive as possible and show a great deal of your own neck from the moment you begin your performance.

What does it mean to be vulnerable? It means staying fully present with your audience instead of hiding behind your script. It means not having too set an idea of which effects you plan to perform.

It means being willing to stop in the middle of a routine if something more interesting comes up, e.g., a spectator makes a provocative comment, something happens at the back of the room, a very funny thought occurs to you, etc.

Magic and performance is essentially about intimate relationship and, strange as it may sound, scripts, practice and "killer" effects are only of value to the degree to which they help you and your audience connect, identify and empathize with each other. The more open you both are, the better, and being vulnerable is a marvelous catalyst for just such a state.

How can you do this while maintaining focus, rhythm and character? That is the question. Then again, how do jazz musicians go off on a melodic tangent, yet never lose touch with the initial or underlying groove?

Mastery. Staying connected with something more seminal than just a moment's particular incarnation or version. Something deeper.

In a sense, it requires you to exist on two levels. On one level you must access the tools of your craft and the instincts of your experience. While on another level you must be fully present for the particular audience and open to their immediate response whether positive or negative.

Often, it is only the most confident performers who have the courage to be vulnerable in front of their audiences.

## CHOOSING A SPECTATOR

*“Close-ups make us anxious about things.” – Jean Luc Goddard*

You are at a large, elegant cocktail party. About 200 people are standing around dressed in their finery. You walk up to a cluster of six people, three men and three women.

How do you decide whom to choose as your all-important first assistant/playmate/co-creator?

Of course, by introducing yourself as a magician you will immediately get a gauge on the level of enthusiasm of at least a few of the people, but this alone is not always enough to arrive at a definite “winner.”

In such cases, keep the fashion industry adage in mind, “Men watch women, and women watch women.”

Choosing a woman as your first helper is a good idea, but the question still remains, which woman?

I often avoid choosing the most attractive woman of the group. She undoubtedly already receives a lot of attention, and some of it may well be unwanted.

The other women present may also harbor resentment or jealousy towards this woman, so why risk losing their sympathy?

Also, my experience suggests that extremely attractive people are seldom the most receptive, easy-going and fun people in a group.

Another important factor is availability. If two of the people seem engrossed in a conversation, or if someone is holding a drink in one hand and three slices of pizza in the other, or even if an enthusiastic person is seated at the far end of a large table, they may well be less available to assist with an effect.

For me enthusiasm, gender, appearance and availability all play an important part in choosing an assistant, but I also look for someone who seems comfortable in their own skin. Over the years,

I have found that people who are secure about who they are tend to be receptive to new experiences and able to make emotional investments without a great deal of reassurance and explanation. These qualities make for consistently wonderful assistants.

## UNDER AND OVER PROVING

*"In the theater the audience wants to be surprised – but by things that they expect." – Tristan Bernard*

If I had to choose between performing an effect in a manner that is under proving or over proving, I am not sure which I would pick.

If you remove a pack of cards from a card case and then a few minutes later cause a sponge ball to appear inside the case, if you never gave the audience the opportunity to peer inside, I would deem that as an instance of under proving.

And if, instead of just spreading out a pack of cards face-up to show that they are indeed all different, you take the time to deal through the entire face-up deck, I would say this is an instance of over proving.

While under proving results in a less than convincing effect, over proving can be dull, damage the rhythm of the performance and draw suspicion to even the fairest of handlings.

Obviously, the best thing to do is avoid both by offering the audience the "perfect amount" of proof. But what exactly constitutes this "perfect amount?" As with the belief we attempt to inspire in our audiences, proof is also a highly subjective and relative thing.

Take for example the dramatic difference between performing for children and adults. Children are notoriously more difficult to deceive, not so much because they are more perceptive, but because they have less smug faith in their own perception.

Unlike adults who tend to stay extremely close to what they find familiar and "well known," children spend much of their time being reminded that there is in fact a lot they do not know.

They live within this awareness. And so when performing for children, the magician often has to show a hand empty several times throughout a routine before the audience is convinced. And even then, there will be a few kids who shout, "It was in your hand!" For such audiences, over proving is seldom an issue.

Consider that even a mountain of proof does not always inspire fervent belief. Even when it does, this does not necessarily mean that proving things is the most effective theatrical means to inspire an audience to believe in either the initial conditions or outcome of an effect.

## HOW DO YOU FEEL?

*"Seeing's believing, but feeling's the truth." Thomas Fuller*

Even as the audience puts the finishing experimental touches on every effect (with each person interpreting it for themselves), they are also always looking to the performer to gauge what they should think and especially feel about whatever is going on.

Your expressed thoughts and feelings are the first screen or filter through which the audience experiences the effect.

Think of your facial expressions, the way you hold yourself, your tone of voice and your words as the soundtrack to the effect, and as anyone who has sat in a movie theatre for even a few minutes will attest to, the music powerfully guides the interpretation of and emotional relationship to the images.

So the big question is: how do you feel about what you are performing? Excited? Bored? Uncertain? Practice your sleights and rehearse your handlings, but be sure to also put some work into exploring and developing your feelings about each effect.

This is precisely the juncture where you must make the extremely important choice between being an actor and a presenter.

Actors bring their roles to life by filling them with personal thoughts and feelings, while presenters (even the wittiest and most professional) are far less interested in personal and creative goals. They are more focused on smiling and speaking clearly while reading off their cue cards.

There is nothing wrong with being a presenter, but if you are to be the best presenter you can be it is crucial to be aware of yourself as a presenter rather than an actor.

This awareness and acceptance is one of the ultimate keys to artistic empowerment.

An actor fueling his or her part with emotions is able to guide the emotions of the audience. But how can a presenter, someone who does not imbue his actions with authentic feeling lead the audience through a varying emotional terrain?

I doubt he can. As presenters, we can be playful, polite and even a bit silly, but it is not exactly an emotional journey, is it? And as I said, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that, except perhaps for the fact that the end result is that audiences do not really care that much about our work.

They do not really care if we find their cards and they do not really care if we make coins vanish and they do not even care (that much) if we burn their twenty dollar bills. They know everything will work out fine because "magicians are all really just fun and games, right?"

If this is how you want your work perceived, fine. But it is most definitely not how I want my work to be viewed.



## FEAR AND THE SUDDEN AUDIENCE

*"The only opponent is within." – Samurai Expression*

I find it endlessly fascinating to encounter the myriad of behaviors and attitudes people adopt when an experience of magic suddenly presents itself.

When you consider that as close-up magicians we do not just encounter, but also participate, coax, reassure, warn, guide, amuse and indulge, I am convinced that we must have one of the most interesting interpersonal professions on the planet.

When you perform walk-around magic and approach a small group of people, you are on a kind of equal footing in that you are both very likely meeting each other for the first time.

However, while the magician may have been involved in a magic experience with intimate audience interaction thousands of times, for most members of the "sudden audience" it is probably their very first time.

Their first time to pick a card from a pack held by a professional sleight-of-hand artist, as well as their first time, not just talking with, but quite possibly touching and being touched by a magic entertainer.

This is why immediately establishing a sense of trust, and then actively building on it with each passing moment is all-important.

Remember, you are acting as a tour guide, leading the group over terrain fraught with inexplicable events and rich emotional undertones.

As an experienced guide you know the many trails, each with its own charms, but how far you travel together and how much fun you have on the journey will be almost completely determined by the audience's willingness. You must earn their trust every step of the way.

This may sound like I am making a bigger deal of this than need be, but the number one impediment to a memorable experience of magic is the audience's fear.

Fear that you will make them look and/or feel gullible and unintelligent by "fooling them," i.e., make them look like fools. Fear that if they lower their guards and play along, you will embarrass them.

Fear that if they experience a totally mystifying event, they will not know what to do or how to feel. Fear that they are not "a good person to show magic to because I always figure out the tricks."

And in a very similar vein, fear that in their complete inexperience, they will not be able to successfully navigate the complicated emotional ground between being overly skeptical, and on the other hand, being too gullible.

I am especially sympathetic in regards to this last fear. Adults who, deep down, are intrigued by the idea of magic and would really like to, not just "play along" (which suggests an amiable condescension) but actually play with me, at the same time doubting they know how to without looking "silly."

You would also do well to keep in mind that when you ask a member of the audience to play a part in creating an effect, they are doing so in front of their peers.

Do you remember how you felt the first time you performed magic in front of your family or friends?

You at least had some idea as to what was going to happen during the show! For a helper from the audience, they realize that whatever happens might well become fodder for their peer group, and so they are often understandably nervous.

This underlying uncertainty (if not actual anxiety) cannot help but dramatically impact all audience response, especially during a close-up magic performance.

## POWER

*"Power is the great aphrodisiac." – Henry A. Kissinger*

I view "power" and "empowerment" as two very different motivations yielding two very different relationships to your audience.

To desire power is often to desire power over something, in this case your spectators. More often than not, this failure to being open to an authentic giving and taking with an audience limits spectators to the roles of witnesses and assistants rather than true participants and co-creators.

At the same time, it cuts off the performer from being involved in precisely the kind of spontaneous, trusting exchange that raises the show above a level of mere "tricks."

Empowerment is the opposite of this and is a result of the performer not wanting power over, but rather power with. The essential difference lies in the performer's attitude towards sharing.

Just as a young child choosing to share his toys signals a burgeoning sense of security and self-confidence, the magician who actively welcomes his audience influencing the proceedings displays strength and understanding.

This state of empowerment stems from an awareness of the truth that it is only through sharing that we are able to experience higher power.

Only by letting go of the reins of control can we experience a theatrical transcendence.

While a yearning for power over his audience inevitably enslaves the magician to the approval of his audience, a passion for sharing frees the performer to practice his art on his own terms.

Ultimately, wanting to have power over others is a perfect way to give away your own power, just as sharing with others is a wonderful way to keep what power can be said to be "yours."

Though perhaps the highest power is a transcendence of such labels as "mine" and "yours." To quote Prudhomme, "Property is theft."

## THE MYSTERIOUS AND THE HUMOROUS

*"All human knowledge takes the form of interpretation." – Walter Benjamin*

As both a seasoned magician and stand-up comic, I have a relatively unique, first-hand experience of the perplexing relationship between the mysterious and the humorous.

Sometimes, the apparently impossible can be very funny because a performance of strong magic can create the tension required for a big laugh.

My favorite example of this is the audience member who bursts into laughter the moment you open your hand to show that a coin has disappeared.

Due to the individual's mood and personality, and the magician's demeanor, the tension is released in laughter rather than frustration or even anger.

Tension and release is one of the underlying dynamics of all performance art, but depending upon how you frame a particular performance (as a mystery, a comedy, a romance, etc.), the presentation will inspire various kinds of tension and release.

With this in mind, you would do well to structure your performance as a mindfully orchestrated series of tensions followed by moments of release.

But how does one distinguish between the moments you want the audience to laugh and the moments you want them to feel awe? Of course, many "comic magicians" attempt to marry the two, but this can be extremely difficult.

While a magic show requires the audience to believe, many gags and jokes actually require the audience to disbelieve.

Consider how audiences might react if they believed that the absurd stories comics often tell were actually true. People would be offended, annoyed and even alarmed.

However, audiences know they are just stories. Of course, audiences also often maintain a certain amount of disbelief during a magic show, but when a signed playing card appears inside a sealed envelope inside a wallet, that is not just a story.

It actually happened. (Imagine saying, "Just joking!" after making three coins vanish into thin air. Or telling a joke about strangling a local politician with your bare hands and then insisting that you were completely serious)!

For a few years I tried to introduce powerful magic moments into my stand-up act while performing in comedy clubs, but it almost always seemed to result in a kind of theatrical confusion.

As long as I was telling jokes, the audience would be comfortable, laughing and having a good time (well, most of the time).

Then when I would perform a feat of magic and completely mystify everyone in the room, it was as if the connection between myself and the audience would suddenly break.

I would lose their focus, people would turn to each other to swap comments on the magic, and I would have to spend four or five minutes slowly regaining a rhythm and the audience's trust.

It seems to me that to inspire awe and wonder (as opposed to "That's a neat trick!") you have to appear to take what you do seriously. Not overly seriously, but with some degree of seriousness, if only during the key magic moments.

In contrast, to inspire laughter it is generally more effective to act in an altogether lighter fashion.

Comedy and magic seem to be strangely at odds with each other, though of course you could say, "It all comes down to the individual performer and how he or she presents their magic and comedy."

As undoubtedly true as this generalization is, the vast majority of the magicians I have seen who effectively combine magic with comedy do so by watering down the magic, often even reducing it to the butt of jokes. I hate that.

I love magic and have the greatest respect for it, though I do understand that because many people find magic and magicians threatening, they are the perfect grist for the comedy mill.

I still loathe seeing it belittled and made fun of.



## BECOMING A BETTER MAGICIAN

*"Practice and opportunity very soon teach the language of art." – William Blake*

I am often asked for tips on how to become a better magician, and though I have spent a fair bit of time reflecting on this, I have very little to suggest beyond the obvious.

Perform, rehearse, practice, study and explore. Those are the keys to becoming, if not a master magician, certainly a better magician. Perform as often as you can, ideally several times each week. The same goes for rehearsing. As for practicing, that should be an integral part of every day of your life.

One of the many virtues of sleight-of-hand is that you can be practicing countless techniques while driving the car, watching television, sitting on the subway, going for a walk, etc.

For me, practice is somewhat seasonal because I often practice sleights while going about my business for the day. So when the weather is warm and dry I focus on cards and when it is cold or damp I practice with coins and other small objects.

But of course, be sure to practice mindfully to make sure that you do not develop bad habits. Studying our craft by reading books and watching videos or DVDs is also a very important part of becoming a better magician, but there is still one more activity which is even more important: exploring your own thoughts and feelings regarding magic.

Tragically, it is this last activity that is most neglected by magicians. Your own creativity is a gift, and a responsibility. Water your originality, nurture your origins and explore what is truly yours.

## CONTROL AND TRUST

*"Keep your hands open, and all the sands of the desert can pass through them. Close them, and all you can feel is a bit of grit." – Taisen Deshimaru*

*"We see through a glass, darkly." – Corinthians 13:12*

It has always struck me as ironic that purveyors of illusion seem so often to suffer from disillusionment. In my experience, magicians as a whole, lack trust in their audience's capacity to appreciate and value magic.

I also believe that all too often, magicians lack trust in themselves as true artists as well as trust in the world that there is magic.

As a result, far too many magi look to ingenious gimmicks, clever presentations and most of all, the idea of "the perfect magic trick" for solace and communion, as well as a means of indirectly expressing their unfulfilled longing.

Of course, smoke, mirrors and telling lie after lie rarely quells this longing, so more than a few magicians become cynical. In the end, instead of nurturing an appreciative relationship with magic and striving to understand it like a lover, these disappointed souls often end up using magic like a blow-up doll.

So much of it comes down to issues of control and emotional security. As with many magicians, there is a big part of me that unfortunately loves control.

I feel most comfortable (read "most safe") when I am in control, not just of my own words and actions, but also of the information others glean from my words and actions.

There is part of me that even attempts to control what people feel about the information I carefully convey!

And of course, this longing for control only serves to keep performers like myself cut off from a far greater power: life. We should strive be less like chess players and computer programmers and more like surfers and skydivers. I am not there yet, but I am definitely making progress.

## CIRCUIT PRACTICING

*"Correct handling of flowers refines the personality." –Bokuyo Takeda*

I think of practicing as a process of laying down the bare technical bones of an effect, including refining the required sleights, handling the props and working out the pocket management.

Rehearsal then adds meat and skin to the effect through the addition of script and emotion. Finally, this fully fleshed-out, but still sleeping creation is woken, only learning to walk during live performances.

Legend has it that Larry Jennings had decks of playing cards placed at many points around his home; beside his bed, on the kitchen counter, on top of the television, etc., and that he did this so he was able to regularly pick up a deck and execute any number of sleights "cold."

In other words, it allowed him to test and maintain his astonishing facility with a deck of cards by forever performing moves without first warming up. Gene Anderson also wrote about this approach in his lecture notes, *The Part-Time Pro* (circa 1980).

As much as I greatly admire the commitment embodied in such an approach, because I always spend at least ten minutes before a professional engagement warming up my hands, and because the majority of my shows consist of dozens of smaller performances with my hands already warmed up from the previous groups, I do not see the value in being able to execute sleights "cold."

There are few things I enjoy more than sitting down and spending time practicing, especially if I am learning a new sleight in the “practice set.”

I think of them as practice sets because instead of executing one move over and over again, I believe it makes more sense to practice a series of sleights. To my mind, this is the ideal preparation for real-world performances where, during a ten-minute show I might perform as many as twenty different sleights.

With this in mind, as I practice I might execute a Double Lift, then a Classic Pass, then a One Hand Top Palm, then a Butterfly Cut, followed by Le Paul's Center Reverse, then a Wichita Slip.

As I execute this series, if I experience one of the moves as a bit stiff, rough or choppy I immediately perform it ten times in a row and then continue with the sequence.

This applies especially to any newer moves. In such cases I will slowly and mindfully execute the move ten or even twenty times before returning to the circuit.

## PURGE YOUR PUZZLES

*"Cleverness is serviceable for everything, sufficient for nothing." – Henri-Frédéric Amiel*

Last night I gave a lecture and afterwards a magician showed me an effect. Or at least that is what I thought he was going to do.

Instead, he had me pick a card, return it to the pack, then after some extremely fair shuffling, he fanned the deck and pulled out my card. His eyes asked, "What do you think?

Do you know how I did it?" and in that moment my mind took two small and unenthusiastic steps towards the postulating of possible methods for what I had just witnessed ("Crimped card, Si Stebbins with a peek . . .").

Then my brain just stopped dead and muttered to itself, "I just don't care." It was a lifeless puzzle.

I had no interest whatsoever and for just a moment I imagine I felt like so many of the people to whom, as a younger magician, I would present my equally un-engaging puzzles.

Totally lacking in the performer's emotional investment, such lifeless puzzles fail to inspire any strong feeling on the part of the audience, and are thus a kind of end in themselves.

Just as the language of logic is perfectly accurate to the degree to which it does not attempt to say anything about the world outside of logic, so too do puzzles possess an isolated and even incestuous quality.

Mysteries on the other hand, resonate with implicit far-reaching values and meaning. Rather than an end in themselves, they are a means to a fuller appreciation of the hidden relationships in the world.

You might ask, "How can a mystery yield appreciation if, by definition, a mystery is an unexplained event?"

By reminding us that there are things that are unexplainable which we nonetheless care about (in fact, perhaps it is only the unexplained/unexplainable that we can be said to truly care about).

And in this reminding, our appreciation of the value of mysteries is heightened while our awareness of their omnipresence is deepened.

While puzzles are presented, the mysterious is ultimately invited. Of course, as magicians we share various elements of an effect with our audiences, but as with the experience of wonder, not even a seasoned practitioner can force the mysterious to appear. With that in mind, we must leave room for the mysterious.

This is one of the most fundamental differences between puzzles and mystery. Puzzles reek of a desire to control the experience, while mysteries only bloom in moments where the performer relinquishes just the right amount of control, leaving the audience to do what they will with the elements of the experience.

The distinction between the explicit and the implicit nicely reflects this relinquishing of control.

One of the reasons many people find reading a novel more enjoyable than later watching a movie based on the same book is because the printed word leaves room for the reader to make every character and scene his own.

The process of reading requires translation in that when you read the word "apple" or even the more descriptive phrase, "a red apple," you nonetheless have an image of it in your head you created.

Just as the printed word invites the involvement of the reader so too do mysteries invite the involvement of the mystified.

Puzzles do not inspire this kind of emotional investment and thus cannot achieve the more profound level of the mysterious. In the final analysis, such explicit puzzles are only about themselves and can teach us precious little. Mysteries however, are about the entire world.



## MAGICIAN, CLOWN, PRIEST

*"He who confronts the paradoxical exposes himself to reality." – Friedrich Durrenmatt*

Many years ago I came across the mythical trinity of the magician, the clown and the priest. I do not recall where I first read about it, but I do remember that it did not leave much of an impression.

That may sound like a bit of a contradiction, but it is the best way I can describe the experience. I read about the trinity, casually held onto it in one of the bottom drawers of my mind and then one day several years ago, I came across it while sorting through a jumble of old cerebral socks.

I was instantly struck by the fact that I had not considered it significant when I first read about it! I fell in love with magic at the age of ten, then started doing stand-up comedy when I was twenty-eight.

By my eighteenth birthday I was a competent young magician, but it really was not until I had been doing stand-up for a few years that my magic performances began to breathe and flow. In other words, it was only after time spent as a clown that my magic transcended the "presentation of clever tricks."

Now when I perform, I tend to move back and forth between the two spheres of magic and comedy. From the "ah" to the "ha" and back again (experiencing the occasional collective "aha" along the way).

At times it is definitely a struggle. One moment the magic gets lost in the humor, and the next moment the humor is completely overshadowed by the magic.

But when I am "on," the humor serves as a kind of set-up and the magic the punch line. I am a natural salesperson and I sometimes run the risk of overselling the magic, so the humor can be a great way to take a bit of the edge off.

At the same time, my comedy can get a little too aggressive for a beat or two, crossing the line from cheeky to rude, and in those moments the magic dissolves any tension.

This ebb and flow is almost ceaseless during performances and as I mentioned, when I'm really "on" it can result in an exhilarating experience for both myself and the audience

I believe another reason I have developed a style that combines magic and comedy is that, as committed as I am to mystifying people, at the same time I am not comfortable with people believing what I do is "real magic."

When people take it too much to heart and get a little too disoriented or excited, I feel invisible. I feel like they are no longer with me and are caught up in an emotional loop inside themselves.

Perhaps they are so in touch with their own astonishment or fear that they emotionally detach from the situation for a few beats.

As for the archetypal role of "the priest," I am not sure how this may or may not develop in my life over the coming years. Yet another mystery which will reveal itself in its own sweet time.

## WHICH DIRECTION?

*"The audience is the true mirror." – Yoshi Oida*

I have never liked the term, "misdirection." I feel it suggests an intention to distract rather than focus, to mislead rather than to guide. There is also an air of guilt about it and of a Band-Aid solution mentality.

It brings to mind some of the more common theories regarding behavior modification and the difference between acting to avoid something versus acting in the hope of obtaining something.

I believe there is greater wisdom in moving towards some things instead of away from others (just as I believe in responding to love rather than reacting to fear).

My dislike for the word "misdirection" is not a matter of mere semantics. If the only reason (or even the primary reason) a performer says a sentence or makes a gesture at a certain point in a routine is to misdirect his audience, it is typically a symptom of weak craft and divided focus resulting from a lack of organic motivation.

Such choices reflect a disregard for any emotional or conceptual through-line established at the beginning of the routine. This may seem like a minor point, but I ardently believe it directly impacts the integrity of the overall effect.

And from a strictly pragmatic point-of-view, actions that are made in the name of misdirection will by their very nature inspire suspicion more often than even identical actions performed in a less concealing spirit

Instead of being intent on concealing, adopt an attitude of revealing. This changes everything.

To wave your left hand to distract the audience from your right hand (as you execute a One Hand Top Palm) is very different from waving your left hand in order to create a magic moment and, at the same time, intelligently structuring your handling so that you may take the opportunity to palm off a card in your right hand.

While misdirection is borne of a fear of being caught, direction stems from a devotion to the perfect magic experience.

Of course, this imagined ideal is seldom achieved. It is, in a sense, a destination rarely arrived at, making each of the steps along the way more valuable.

## MAGIC AND THE MAGICAL

*"Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow."*  
– Aesop

When you perform for an audience, do you want your work to be magic or magical? Put another way, do you want people to believe that what you do is magic-like or magic.

To shed a little more light on what might seem an unclear or nitpicky distinction, consider the difference between the real and the realistic.

When you sit in a movie theatre and during the movie someone is killed in a car accident, you might think to yourself, "Very realistic."

But if, when driving home from the movie, you pass a car accident and get a brief glimpse of someone lying on a stretcher being loaded into an ambulance, you are not going to think to yourself, "Very realistic," because you experience it as real. It is not like the real.

In much the same way, we experience some things as like magic and other things as magic. What is the difference? It is up to you and your audience to decide, but this much I will assert. The realness of an event is largely determined by your performance style and your audience's "conditions of belief."

Many magicians present what they do as a lark. Just a bit of fun. That style lends itself to being interpreted as magical rather than magic (though I am not suggesting that you have to refuse to smile and wear black to present yourself as "doing magic.")

Again, they are stylistic choices, but you can never remove the audience's beliefs from the equation because to be a magician is to be experienced as being a magician. For this, you must fulfill a variety of subtle conditions of belief.

These conditions vary widely between cultures and individuals, though in our visually oriented culture what people see "with their own eyes" they tend to believe.

People also tend to believe only what makes sense to them. By that I mean, even as we cause strange things to happen, people will only believe them if they are somehow grounded in the everyday. Without this grounding, our effects will literally be incomprehensible.

Paradoxically, audiences must understand that they "don't understand" for them to experience awe or wonder, and for them to understand this, the magic must happen within a very clear context.

The most powerful magic tends to consist of utterly impossible events happening under "test conditions" including examination, open-handedness, even repetition.

Such conditions are psychologically designed to create the impression of maximum information. Nothing is concealed or even merely implied. Everything is explicit. In other words, understood.

Not only does the audience understand the conditions, they understand that they understand. All is perfectly clear. Only then, when the unexpected strikes will the audience fully understand that they cannot possibly understand what has happened.

Or rather, they understand only too well what has happened, but cannot even begin to fathom how it happened.

For your work to be magic rather than magical, it must be experienced as real rather than realistic, as a documentary rather than a drama.

And the minds and sensibilities of many members of your audience will resist this conclusion with every fiber of their being. It can sometimes be a bit of a wrestling match, though I believe that we cannot “take” our audiences where they do not, on some level, want to go.

## SANDING

*"No house should ever be on a hill. It should be of the hill. Belong to it." – Frank Lloyd Wright*

I once had the extremely good fortune of watching Gene Anderson lecture and he spoke about "sanding magic routines." When first either practicing an existing routine or developing an original one, there tends to be various "corners."

These range from unnecessary words and actions to less than perfectly polished techniques. These are the same corners on which the audience's (and the performer's) attention can snag, hang up for a moment and become diverted.

Even if a word or action does not actually call attention to itself, if it is unnecessary, it is like so much fat on the bones of the effect. Ultimately, it cannot help but slow it down.

The work then, is to be forever sanding, rounding this or that corner and even sanding down some corners altogether.

Note that, just as sanding not only removes bumps and scuffs from a wooden board, it also blends and feathers the remaining elements together.

For how long should you engage in this reductive process? To quote Anderson, "Until there ain't no place left to sand." Anderson's word "sanding" has a simple, physical quality that has always resonated with me.

I think about it when editing down a script or trying to figure out how to remove a phase from a routine.



I also think about it when developing an individual move, including the finger placements and the "size" of the overall gesture.

The end goal is an integration of the various elements to such a point that all distinctions vanish. Balance is a natural outcome of this process.

In fact, when I practice such moves as the pass, I often reflect on an idea I call, "The Theory of the Invisible Hands." As I practice the pass, I strive for neither hand to do more work than the other, and thus neither hand pulls more focus than the other as a result of this perfect sharing.

Actually, it is more than a "sharing," because sharing suggests at least three entities: two or more sharers and what is shared.

A perfectly shared move, performed at the ideal moment while you deliver the ideal script achieves a harmony such that it is as if the hands vanish.

All the elements typically perceived distinctly (the "hands," the "arms," the "cards," the "magician" and the "audience") vanish. They are there, but not experienced as separate.

For perhaps only an instant, a profoundly liberating fire engulfs the separate puzzle pieces, fusing them together into a single puzzle. A fire sparked by the perfectly balanced move.

## THOSE WHO WILL RESIST

*"Men are more unwilling to have their weaknesses and imperfections known than their crimes." – Lord Chesterfield*

No doubt we would all very much like to have more opportunities to practice our craft as well as be better paid. At the same time, professionals and hobbyists alike would both prefer magic and magicians to be generally viewed in an altogether more respectful light than we often are. There is little debate on this front, but the question remains, "What can we do to inspire such a shift?"

I have a few suggestions, but before I share them, take a moment to ask yourself, "Do I really want more opportunities to perform, more people to become interested in magic and for magic to be considered in a more respectful light?"

This may seem like a silly question, but there are more than a few magicians who are quite happy with the present state of affairs.

They are not interested in change and are actually threatened by the prospect.

Take for example the magician who absolutely loves embarrassing and even humiliating people. He might be quite happy with the public's general suspicion of magicians, thinking that it is only fair.

Then there is the magician who performs magic, not to make other people feel inferior, but to help himself feel superior by demonstrating night after night, "I know how this is done and you do not."

Then there is the magician who on some unconscious level realizes that he is a very bad magician. He has no interest in practicing, is forever making a muddle of effects and is more than a little relieved that people know as little about magic as they do.

He knows that if the audiences he is able to coax into watching his fourth-rate performances (complete with 17th century jokes) had even just a little more appreciation or understanding of the craft, discipline and personality a devoted student of magic brings to a performance, they would have little patience for his clumsy technique and wearisome presentations.

There is at least one other kind of magician who will desperately resist the nurturing of a more sophisticated audience, namely those who have no interest in being perceived as entertainers or performing artists.

They want to be thought of as so-called "real magicians." You know the type. Both onstage and off, they claim (or at least strongly imply) that they possess supernatural abilities or some such crap.

Despite the fact that they usually employ the most traditional of magic methods, they actually have more in common with snake oil salesmen and faithless televangelists.

In exchange for their audience's sincere interest and heartfelt emotional investment, these thieves, these Darth Vaders of magic, give into the dark side of the archetype of the magician and spout metaphysical, New Age mumbo jumbo. Such jaded deceit is the product of pure, uncreative, selfish ego.

However, these foes of magic's progress, these used car salesmen of the theatre, will not be easily defeated because of their all-too-predictable popularity with certain segments of the general population.

Just as children like to believe there is a Santa Claus and disillusioned adults often seek solace in drugs and cynicism, so too will these faux shamans always find an eager following.

And yet, such converts will be the last to experience what authentic magic there is to be found during a performance, because such magic is a result of honest and creative connection, not clichéd lies, posturing and the usual accompanying psychobabble.

These are but a few of the personalities hiding inside the magic community who resist any attempt at nurturing a different relationship to our craft and the general public. And make no mistake.

That is what I am talking about, changing relationships, however subtly. Even the slightest change will not be easy and it will of course initially feel more than a little uncomfortable. Remember the first time you tried doing a Double Lift or Classic Pass? No doubt it felt extremely awkward.

Encouraging a shift in our relationship to our audiences and even to our own magic will be no different. The important thing to keep in mind is that there is so very much to gain.

And in moments of doubt - and there will be more than a few - do not forget to remind yourself why you became interested in seeking change in the first place: more opportunities to perform, better pay and more receptive and appreciative audiences.

## LET THE AUDIENCE LEAD

*"It is the spontaneous involvement of the spectator's own senses that enables the magician to create his illusions." – David Abram*

A great deal about our performances is designed to control. Our scripts, our sleights, even many moments of so-called "audience interactions" often reduce individuals to a "Pavlov's dog" level of involvement.

Of course, some performers are sincerely open to audience response. Not just smiling, nodding, thanking and wisecracking, but emotionally able to receive at least some of what their audiences have to offer.

Despite the debilitating repetition sometimes involved in such jobs as walk-around magic, these rare magicians leave themselves as open to criticism as they are to praise.

These are often the same magicians who are less interested in mechanized exchanges ("Not that hand, the clean hand. Oh, that was the clean hand!") and are more interested in organic interplay which, if not without goals, is at least somewhat free-flowing.

Many of us are sometimes frustrated by the unoriginal and repetitive comments laypeople make, yet far fewer of us take responsibility for this sad state of affairs and correctly view it as a reflection of our own unoriginal and repetitive performances!

The braver of us (and that sure as heck does not always include me) want a real response to what they do and want to respond authentically in kind.

But let us take it a step further. Rather than spending any more time discussing the virtues of those magicians emotionally open to spontaneous feedback, what about those even rarer citizens of the magic community who occasionally let go of the steering wheel altogether and let the audience drive.

These are the performers that I am truly impressed with and find no small source of inspiration.

To take the stage, grab everyone's attention and then relinquish control and flow with whatever energy or mood arises is a sign of greatness.

By this, I do not mean taking the stage without an act or a sense of responsibility for the show and to just start chatting with the crowd or even stand there in silence "until something happens."

Instead, I am talking about being on that stage in an organic and here/now fashion while still fulfilling your performance goals and responsibilities as a professional.

It is about walking on stage, not with an iron clad set of nine routines which you perform (read "execute") in exactly twenty-two minutes, but about taking that stage with an openness, natural ease and curiosity indicative of an unusual strength of character, humility and performance wisdom.

Nothing changes the fact that you are the one onstage. You are the headliner, the "entertainment" and the artist. It all rests on your shoulders. But such magicians understand that they cannot take the audience anywhere the audience does not want to go.

The performer and the audience share the power and, in fact, these wise and seasoned practitioners understand that nothing excites and impresses an audience more than a sense that they have a definite say in the proceedings and that they are able to dramatically influence the tone, rhythm and direction of the show.

This cathartic communion makes for great theatre. Such masters of the stage guide every moment and their greatest illusion is the concealing of this guiding. How do they accomplish this wondrous feat? In much the same way a canoe expert sits quietly in the back of the craft with his paddle never leaving the water. By guiding from the rear.

## IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

*"When you practice, imagine that you are doing your exercises in front of an audience. It suddenly becomes important that you engage fully, and avoid sloppiness. In this way, the quality of your work will improve, and the training will be genuinely useful." – Yoshi Oida*

Practicing in front of a mirror will surely help you to see how your audience watches your hands, face and body, but it will not give you insight into how your audience will perceive them. The totality of a spectator's experience will forever remain outside your knowing.

Certainly gasps, applause or even unimpressed faces will give you a strong impression of how members of your audience feel during certain moments, but no amount of mirror work will help you with that.

Such awareness comes and goes with the start and finish of each performance, and its fleeting nature is precisely what makes ours a performing art.

The masters learn something from every performance and still, there is no "holding onto" most of what happens during a show. The best we can do is be present, learn what you we can and then let it go. All three are equally important.

In this way, while practicing in front of a mirror yields vital visual information, in regards to the overall magic experience the application of this information is limited. Also, in keeping with the expression, "Everything has its price," there is a very serious risk involved in too much time spent in front of the mirror.



Just as Narcissus became obsessed with his own reflection in the waters and eventually drowned, so too do some magicians succumb to their practice mirrors and come to unconsciously edit their own experience of their sleights, rendering them virtually invisible. How? By blinking.

Over the years I have known more than a few magicians with this self-deluding habit and based upon my experience at recent conventions, I suspect their numbers are increasing.

Perhaps it is due to the emphasis placed on "invisible sleights" rather than on technique that is undetectable within the context of an entire effect.

Whatever the reason, this is a very difficult habit to unlearn. The irony of the affliction is that an experienced performer learns to orchestrate the ebb and flow of an audience's ever changing focus such that the spectators are not focused on his hands as he executes his sleights.

So where is the audience looking? At the performer's face and his strangely blinking eyes!

Even after weaning themselves off their mirrors, recovering blinkers sometimes continue to blink during the execution of a sleight. Are you a blinker? If you are not sure, ask your magician friends to watch you as you perform a few routines.

If they catch you blinking, begin to unlearn the habit as soon as possible. That is, unless you want to continue to be a member of a growing army of sleight-of-hand magicians who appear to be wearing overly dry contact lenses and are more interested in their hands than their audiences.

## THE MASTER IMAGINED

*"Angels can fly because they take themselves so lightly." -G.K. Chesterton*

I hope to one day be a master magician. What exactly is that? I cannot say for sure, but in my imagination he takes his craft and creativity very seriously, but not himself. He views himself as a conduit or a facilitator.

He is quick-witted, gentle, friendly and emotionally engaging. At the same time, there is something about the way he moves and speaks which completely holds people's attention. There is something both strong and vulnerable about him.

He doesn't demand or command respect so much as he inspires it. Everyone he talks with feels special, heard and seen in a way that they very seldom do.

Such a magician exudes a sense of understanding rather than knowing. As he performs, he fills your mind with a stream of extraordinary thoughts while, at the same time, you feel an exquisite range of emotions, from joy to sorrow, even fear, and of course wonder and awe.

During the show, you are nowhere else but there, participating with all of you. Then when the show ends, it feels a little like a spell has broken and as you come back down to earth you experience a type of awe different than you felt during the performance.

This is a gentler awe inspired by being able to appreciate what you went through during the performance. Now that it has become part of the past, you have a perspective on it. At the end of the performance you feel lighter.

You are left with a memorable collection of impressions, but one in particular stands out: the magician was wholly himself, and that was no small part of the magic of being in his presence.

The magic was not so much "his" as it was ours. But as wonderfully open and intimate as the magician was, you are left with the impression (more delicious than frustrating) that he is more of a mystery now than before his performance. Was it even a "performance?"

It felt like something else.

## SECRETS, UNDERSTANDING & WONDER

*"Brain, n. An apparatus with which we think that we think." – Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary*

Secrecy does not necessarily inspire wonder. Imagine handing someone a puzzle consisting of a few pieces of twisted wire and challenging them to solve it. After several frustrating minutes the person returns the puzzle to you unsolved.

You turn your back and a moment later turn around holding the solved puzzle. When they ask you, "How did you do it," (assuming they even care to know) and you refuse to share the secret, they will not necessarily experience wonder.

They may be puzzled, intrigued and even perplexed, but wonder is an altogether different feeling.

When we feel puzzled or perplexed, we feel separated from an understanding. In a sense, "shut out." In stark contrast, when we feel wonder, as disorienting as it can be, we also feel "let in" on a big secret, rather than shut out of a small one.

## IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A BAD TRICK?

*"Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed." – Francis Bacon*

Just as every magician has his or her own strengths and weaknesses, so do magic effects.

Yes, an exceptional magician can make almost any magic idea effective for an audience, just as an inexperienced and uninspired magician can fail to delight and deceive the friendliest of audiences with the most marvelous of routines.

But there are good tricks and bad tricks, just as there are plots with greater audience appeal, sleights that are better suited for the majority of real-life performance situations and routines that are structured more seductively than others.

Ultimately, I think effects can be evaluated as either weak or strong in relationship to the nature of our audiences, i.e. the human condition.

For example, it appears as if humans do not live forever (at least here on Earth) and so some routines are simply too long for people's attention spans.

Groups of humans out for a good time seldom sit in a long, perfectly straight line of chairs, one behind the other, and so, based on the importance of sightlines, some routines are extremely impractical.

A perfect example of this is the old "rising card" effect accomplished by pushing up the top card of the pack with the right pinky as the first finger is waved over the deck.

And as for the critical issue of credibility, the human mind believes an event happened only if the experience fulfills a number of criteria and the more impossible-seeming the event, the more stringent the criteria. Some routines fulfill these criteria. Many do not.

## ARTICULATE HANDS

*“The hands may almost be said to speak. Do we not use them to demand, promise, summon, dismiss, threaten, supplicate, express aversion or fear, question or deny? Do we not use them to indicate joy, sorrow, hesitation, confession, penitence, measure, quantity, number and time? Have they not the power to excite and prohibit, to express approval, wonder or shame? Do they not take the place of adverbs and pronouns when we point at places and things? In fact, though the people and nations of the earth speak in a multitude of tongues, they share in common the universal language of hands.” – Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, XI, 3*

*“It is important to remind yourself to ‘taste’ the movements. Doing them mechanically doesn’t mean very much.” – Yoshi Oida*

Sometimes they speak in long sentences, other times in short fiery bursts. As with our voice boxes, our hands speak with both action and stillness.

The Top Change is a fine example of this. When I execute this marvelously versatile move, I keep the right hand still as the left hand suddenly moves forward, gesturing towards a nearby spectator.

The switch of the card held between the right thumb and first two fingers and the card resting on top of the deck is accomplished almost exclusively by the left thumb.

The thumb first pushes the card off the top of the deck so that it slides beneath the right hand’s card, then the left thumb pulls the uppermost card back onto the pack.

This exchange happens as the left hand, holding the pack, begins to move forward towards the spectator. I am typically asking a question such as, "Was this your card?" (referring to the card which was originally in the right hand) and as I gesture towards the spectator, I extend my left first finger in a casual pointing gesture.

The different actions of the two hands involved in the Top Change create ideal cover, though sometimes it is more deceptive for the hands to perfectly share a sleight rather than either of them "pulling focus."

My favorite example of this is the Classic Pass with a pack of cards. After decades of practice, performance and thought, I feel that there is a great deal to be said for executing the move such that the left fingers pull the upper half of the deck downwards with precisely the same force as the right thumb and fingers raise the lower half.

There is something mystical about this perfect balance, this sublime sharing with neither hand leading or following. Whether it can be called a "canceling" or a "vanishing" of the sleight, this approach of perfect sharing seems to powerfully minimize any tension or telltale signs.

After years of focusing your consciousness on accomplishing the task of exchanging two halves of the pack with your hands (two sides of the body) in perfect balance, the symmetry cannot help but resonant throughout your body so long as you do not block it.

More often than not, practitioners will block this extremely powerful spirit/energy at their wrists, elbows, shoulders, neck or waist.



As New Age as it undoubtedly sounds, there is no limit to the power of striving to do each sleight with all of yourself. Think of a painting as wide and as high as your eye can see, or hearing a single tone go on and on with no sense of which direction the sound is coming from.

This is an illusion without a telltale beginning or end, a wall without the smallest crack or the slightest discernible pattern.

Certain gestures or words spark suspicion because, if only for a moment, they are somehow disharmonious with whatever came before or after.

But if you execute your sleights and deliver your script in such a way that they express, not just a part of you, but all of you, in that particular situation and at that particular point in time, the result is a seamlessness that will inevitably inspire unblinking belief.

In such moments, every member in the audience believes, not only because the illusion is perfect but because the illusion is so utterly based in the reality of the moment that the illusion is true.

With mindful and heartfelt practice you can give your hands a voice. Two voices, actually. They have so much to say: "I am empty," "I am holding a coin," "There is nothing to see over here, but look, look what is happening over there," "The . . . coin . . . has . . . vanished!" "Hello." "Hold on. Wait a second." "Come closer." "What could be more fair?"

Put your consciousness in your hands, but beware cutting your hands off from the rest of your body. They should not be the stars of the show. That reduces your performance to a display, to a "watch me" rather than a "let's do this together."

I have witnessed more than a few sleight-of-hand wizards who left me with the strong impression that if their hands were suddenly chopped off, the performer might fall to the floor in shock, but the hands would continue to perform.

This reflects an unfortunate division, the consciousness of the magician having become overly absorbed with the life of the hands, forgetting that they are but a means to a far more social end.

Give your hands a clear voice, the more articulate the better, but they should never be more than supporting actors in the play.

The stars should always be you and your audience, and no matter what genre your performance style suggests (drama, comedy, thriller, sci-fi, horror or western - that would be neat, a cowboy magician), always try to nurture a sense of romance with your audience rather than your hands.

## THE BEST TEACHER

*"When the student is ready, the teacher will appear."- Zen Buddhist expression*

There is much you can learn from lectures, private lessons, sessioning with other magicians and researching books, videos and DVDs.

But you can learn so much more from your audience, especially about the one thing none of those educational sources can: how you are in front of spectators.

Given that magic is a performing art, it is all just so much theory and conjecture until a particular "you" and a particular "audience" meet up on a particular night.

I say, "particular you," because, just as no two audiences or nights are the same, you too are not the same from day to day. This is especially so, given an ardent desire to evolve as an artist.

Of course, real change tends to be frustratingly slow and extremely subtle, and typically we do not notice many changes until they have fully solidified. The leaves are green for months and then one day they are "suddenly" gold, brown and orange.

If you have both the desire and the courage to learn from your audience, they will unconsciously guide you, not just to what they enjoy, but to what is inherently powerful and important.

Of course, they can teach you a great deal about what is funny, mystifying and moving, but each of these relatively small lessons is only a single piece in the puzzle of an infinitely more valuable set of lessons.

These are the lessons regarding why people believe what they do and how they respond to events beyond their understanding.

In this way, your audience can teach you about you as a magician, while also teaching you about you as a human being.

Consciously striving to learn from your audience, you will also become more open to the magic experience as an act of co-creation.

But to make the very most of this incredible opportunity, it is crucial for you to develop ways, your ways, to leave room in your show for the audience to make their mark.

Having people pick cards is not enough. It will only happen if you are sincerely excited about the prospect and you are a proactive student.

As you rattle off your patter and secretly obtain your pinky break under the top two cards of the pack, do not merely look at your audience. See them. See them for what they are, a collection of utterly unique individuals graciously giving you their time and attention.

Better still, instead of “rattling off” your patter, use that precious handful of words to reach out to your audience, simultaneously welcoming a response. When the response comes, do not just listen to it. Work to actually hear it.

Seeing and hearing are extremely powerful ways of connecting, but there is an even more potent (and more subtle) means of communing with those seated in front of you: feel them.

Sense their excitement, impatience, astonishment, annoyance, boredom, doubt, embarrassment, delight, confusion and wonder.

Of course, many of the feelings spectators/participants experience during a performance of magic are not "nice" or simple, and some of them can be quite challenging and even upsetting for the performer. (This is especially true when you sense that the audience lacks respect for you, or rather, who they believe you to be.)

But the only alternative is to not leave yourself open to those challenging feelings by emotionally cutting yourself off from your audience.

I have done precisely that many times over the years due to the fatigue, nerves, anger and frustration resulting from difficult performance situations, dealing with rude people or even just feeling burnt out after too many hours of performing.

Performers are no less human than their audiences, and I am not for a second suggesting you should beat yourself up for not staying emotionally connected to both your work and your audience every second of every show.

However, the more often you can, the more you are going to learn. An audience can teach you through their words, their silences, their glances, their laughter, their surprise and of course their applause.

As with most learning curves, this one is founded on trust. They have to trust that you are sincerely interested in their responses, just as you have to trust that if you leave yourself open to their emotional feedback, they will strive to be as honest and, ideally, as constructive as possible.

Yet again, it comes down to brave, mindful sharing. Share your clever words and your well thought-out effects, but in the process, do not forget to share the most important thing you have to offer: yourself.

Only then will the people in your audience give of themselves and be the amazing teachers they can be.

## RANDOM ACTS OF MAGIC

*"I want your heart. If you want to learn something, go to school."*  
– Stephen King

Most magic is performed within an explicit context of control and presentation. We perform routines coupled with presentations that are obviously scripted and rehearsed.

I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong with the nature of this experience, only that as with anything homogenous, it is limited.

Sometimes, I try to imagine how people might react to magic if it appeared less controlled, less obviously "performed." I suspect the response would be more spontaneous and personal, less "for another," and more for themselves. A less presented response to a less presented happening.

For instance, imagine standing on a street corner with a few people waiting to cross a busy intersection at the core of a bustling city. The clouds are dark and heavy overhead and everyone is rushing to their various destinations in the hope of avoiding the rain.

The light finally changes from red to green and you step off the curb. At the exact same moment, the sky opens up and it starts to pour.

Just then, a man in a trench coat a few feet in front of you reaches up, pulls an umbrella out of thin air and goes on his way.

What would it be like to witness such a patently unperformed feat? No lame music, no corny lines. Not a smile or a wink. Just magic which, for all you know only you witnessed.

I am deeply moved by the unselfishness and the potential impact of such random acts of magic.

Wonders that, I believe, would live on in the minds of witnesses far longer than magic performed in controlled situations. Nurture a world of wonders by creating a random act of magic today.



## SELF-EXPRESSION

*"Don't perform, express." – David Mamet*

Self-expression is one of the keys to magic as an art form. Yet, perversely, magic seems to attract a lot of people who are interested in a "flight from self."

Men and women interested, not in expressing their thoughts and feelings through magic, but rather saying and doing effects exactly as they are described in the one-page instructions.

As beginners, this "paint by numbers" approach makes sense. But if you have been in magic for more than a couple of years, it is a wasted opportunity.

This applies equally to both stage and close-up magicians. There may not be quite the same library of suggested patter lines for large-scale illusionists, but God knows many stage performers nonetheless gravitate towards a minute handful of antiquated presentations including embarrassing, pseudo-romantic "dances" between the magician and his unfortunate assistant.

Or tight t-shirts combined with silly sword & sorcery themes. And of course, the classic relationship between the "good-natured but hapless" magician and the eye rolling, "oh brother" assistant. (It's a reversal of the traditional gender power structure, get it)? These themes and dynamics are all so very tired.

Yes, these unoriginal antics are at least an attempt to make the illusions more than just tricks, but they still lack the golden key to the whole darn thing: authentic personality.

For that, you need more than a new tuxedo and a large glittery gizmo with well-oiled doors.

You need guts, desire and the courage to try something a little more personal, even though you know it might be dismissed or even laughed at.

## STICK TO YOUR WEAKNESSES

*"Natural abilities are like natural plants that need pruning by study." – Francis Bacon*

I think of each of the elements of performance as a different type of "muscle." In other words, scripting is a type of muscle, as is manual skill, character acting, improvising, entertaining, appearance, knowledge and originality.

All muscles which every performer has, but no two magicians have developed the same muscles to quite the same degree.

There is no way you can completely separate any one of these aspects from any of the others because they are intimately related and intertwined.

However, being able to write an effective script is a different "muscle" than being able to execute a deceptive Second Deal, just as being entertaining is different than being knowledgeable.

A traditional adage suggests that we should "stick to our strengths," but if your goal is to become a better magician, I strongly recommend that you do precisely the opposite.

Nurture yourself and your audiences by reaching for things that are not quite yet in your grasp. Push yourself, especially in the areas of our craft that you feel least secure.

If you are more comfortable creating presentations than executing sleight-of-hand, I suggest you do not develop another script for three months. Spend that time practicing in front of the mirror.

Or if you only perform other magician's effects, spend some time striving to develop your own handlings and effects. Such enlightened efforts and courage of spirit will yield so much more than continuing to exercise your already strong muscles.

## CREATIVE PROMOTION

*"Live by publicity, you'll probably die by publicity." – Russell Baker*

Put down those playing cards, close that magic book and shelve all those videos sitting on top of the television. You know enough tricks. Instead, grab a pad of paper and let us brainstorm about promoting your services to your key decision makers.

Notice I wrote "services," not "magic." That is because you are not trying to sell your magic to a restaurant owner. You are trying to sell him on the idea of excited customers and repeat business.

In the same way, you are not selling your magic to a company appearing at an upcoming trade show. You are selling the idea of increased sales.

One of the absolute keys to a successful business is to focus, not on your product, but on the needs of your customers. As for creative promotion, do you have a professional and successful-looking business card? Based on the hundreds magicians have handed me, the chances are very good that you do not.

You need a card that says, "I am very successful, I am not trying too hard to impress you, I have a quiet, confident, personal style and I am first and foremost a business person."

That means no illustrations of rabbits in hats or card fans and no references to being a member of an obscure magic association (and in the real world, they are all obscure)!

And cards printed on your home computer are definitely out. They simply will not make the kind of impression you need to make if you are serious about magic as a business.

Go with a high-quality cardstock and there is no harm using a little color (after all, you are a magician). Also, stick to business fonts.

Finally, get the card professionally designed and laid out. If you are not prepared to spend at least a few hundred dollars on your first batch of cards, wait until you can. Otherwise you will just be throwing your money away.

Worse actually, because you will be sending a member of your marketing team (which is exactly what your business card is), out into the world dressed either like an unfortunate street person or a third-rate circus clown.

The same thinking applies to your letterhead and single page of rave reviews from previous clients.

Get everything professionally printed. And remember, two quotes from high profile companies are worth twenty quotes from unknowns.

As for your color photo (and yes, it should definitely be color) this should be the most expensive part of your package. As important as a card or quotes page are, when a prospect sees them they do not feel that they have a strong sense of who you are or what you are like.

The photo is a different thing altogether. People routinely place a great deal of stock in the impressions they get from a picture.

Appearances matter, especially in show business. I suggest you save up your money and splurge on the second best "head shot/musicians/performers" photographer in town.

You do not need the very best. In this case, second best will suffice. It will probably cost you between \$500 and \$1,000. (Remember, many people borrow tens of thousands of dollars to start a business). Do not be cheap! Invest in yourself!

You should spend a lot of time thinking about a few key sentiments you would like your photo to express. Funny? Friendly? Handsome? Intelligent? Mysterious?

Be especially cautious with this last one. Many magicians try to look mysterious and the vast majority of them end up looking like extras from an episode of the original Star Trek series (the episode when Kirk and Co. were stranded on the Planet of the Depressed Amateur Actors).

To promote yourself you have to mail out this stuff to appropriate people, then follow up with a phone call, right? Wrong. Everybody does that. And what everybody does, you do not want to do. It is better to do almost anything else.

Like what? Like sending your promo package along with a personalized videotape or a huge cookie or a bunch of balloons or a book on magic.

Or have it delivered by one of those singing telegram freaks. Or include an expensive key ring or a subscription to a magazine. Something, anything that helps you stand out and gives the impression that you are creative, professional and eager to "go the extra mile" to work with your prospect.

## REMINDER AND PROMISE

*"Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible."* – Paul Klee

"Wonder" is one of the most overused words in the magician culture and - as with all such words- over time its meaning has become blurred, dulled, even lost. I have been thinking about wonder for decades and I must admit, sometimes I think I have a decent understanding of it and sometimes I am sure I do not.

We feel wonder at the movies, art galleries, with children, in nature, falling in love and in a million other contexts, and one of the most thrilling elements of wonder for me is that of surprise.

Even if that which inspires our wonder is not a surprise to us, that we feel wonder sometimes is. Of course, not all surprises occur in an instant. Some surprises happen slowly over time and it is not until they reach their fruition that we realize we are surprised despite the gradual development.

There is also often an element of joy to wonder. It allows us to get in touch with underlying emotional states and even though our joy may be routinely eclipsed by feelings of sorrow, anger and frustration, joy is perhaps one of our most natural and primary of emotions.

In this way, wonder breaks through the topsoil of an emotional terrain molded by life's hurts and disappointments, and momentarily uncovers the gold that is always there. Waiting.

Wonder also inspires curiosity on a number of levels. For some, wonder gives birth to the intellectual question, "How?" While for others it raises the cosmological question, "Why?"



In fact, one of the hallmarks of experiencing wonder is that, because it has a way of dramatically expanding our perception, it sparks thoughts and feelings of a less particular and more universal nature.

Sometimes wonder feels like a brief brush in the dark against a beast so much larger than ourselves. Other times we experience it as a lifting of a veil, even of enlightenment. It could even be argued that, thanks to wonder, we temporarily transcend our profoundly limited idea of "self."

Mixed with these feelings of surprise, joy and curiosity are also often feelings of excitement and awe. Of course, surprises can be quite exciting, but when we experience wonder, much of the accompanying excitement is a response to the sudden rush of possibilities wonder suggests.

After all, as the small and overly familiar walls of our everyday consciousness crack, buckle and disappear in the wake of an all-powerful wave of wonder, we commonly find ourselves in a strange world.

This is why wonder is often cited as the handmaiden to breakthroughs ranging from the scientific and artistic to the emotional and spiritual. In such a rare and dazzling light, even the most ancient of sights are seen anew.

Ultimately, the experience of wonder is a liberating reminder of the unknown worlds existing just below the mundane surfaces of our own. Wonder is also a transcendent promise that, as strange and unlikely as these other worlds may appear, we may miraculously visit them, if only for a time.

## CHOOSING MATERIAL

*“Reality only reveals itself when it is illuminated by a ray of poetry.” – Georges Braque*

After a sufficient amount of practice and rehearsal, I advise you to perform any effect that appeals to you in front of a live audience. However, only continue to perform the effects your audiences enjoy as well.

This may seem obvious to you, but all too many magicians are blinded by their own love of an effect.

As a hobbyist this prejudice is acceptable, but as a working professional your criteria must also take into account audience preferences.

Of course, it makes sense to choose material based on your present level of technical skill and performance style, but considering that (ideally) both of these are continually evolving, I suggest you select material suiting your skill level, material a little beyond your skill level, and material that is utterly technically self-working, requiring no sleight-of-hand whatsoever.

The first group of effects will polish your existing abilities and nurture self-confidence, the second will encourage you to stretch and grow, and the third will completely shift your focus from sleights and routining to pure presentation.

At the same time, maintaining your relationship to “move-less” handlings will inspire you to search for the same satisfying experience in your more technically demanding routines.

Technically easy effects also tend to be simple and direct, and the more you cultivate an understanding and appreciation of these twin paragons of magic principles the better.

I also wholeheartedly advise you to develop a repertoire consisting of effects with a wide variety of props.

If you perform close-up, don't just stick with cards and coins. Commit to learning effects with rubber bands, business cards, borrowed bills, rings, sugar packets, cutlery and more.

This will keep your performances fresh and ceaselessly interesting while nurturing an underlying confidence, proficiency and resourcefulness.

And if you are a stage magician, be sure to develop a repertoire of effects with objects of all shapes, sizes and description. Variety will keep your audiences stimulated, maintain attention (always a challenge in our fast-cutting, hyper-edited, MTV-culture) and present your audience with a parade of opportunities for different emotional associations.

Such a variety of material will also dissuade agents and corporate clients from typecasting you as a performer of only one kind of magic or a performer suitable for only one kind of venue. No magician has ever been accused of having too much variety in his work.

## THE PLAY'S THE THING

*"Everyone has talent. What is rare is the courage to follow the talent to the dark place where it leads." - Erica Jong*

People are seldom more beautiful, honest, spontaneous and creative than when they are playing. Children play daily, but adults play far less often. Close-up magic, amazing art form that is it, can actually act as a catalyst for just this kind of beatific happening.

In fact, whether I am performing or sitting in the audience, my favorite shows have always had a strong air of play about them.

Just as it is a real treat for an audience to watch a performer completely relax, play, and leave the scripted show and structured set behind, as a performer it is even more thrilling to step off the planned path and be met with such enthusiasm from the audience that he takes another unplanned step, then another.

During such mystical minutes, time vanishes, along with any little editors, critics and advisors in my head. It is exhilarating to explore and take risks and for the audience to respond with enthusiasm, fueling even more improvisation.

This joyful communion results in a profound sense of connection, even a shared identity. The best of plays have no script.

## IN SEARCH OF REAL MAGIC

*"I have been a stranger in a strange land." Exodus 2:22*

I once believed the magic existed in my hands and in the goal of perfect sleight-of-hand. Then I believed the magic existed in the minds of my audience and in their experience of my effects.

Then I believed the magic existed in my belief in myself as a worker of wonders. Then I experienced a powerful dissolution of these original divisions and came to think of the magic as a culmination of all these elements: my deceptive hands, the receptive minds of the audience and my own belief in my work and myself.

Clearly there is much power in each of these elements. Yet, more recently I have been regularly visited by a growing suspicion that the magic has nothing to do with my hands, the audience's receptivity or my own theatrical conviction.

Some days I find myself wondering if maybe all of those initial insights were merely signposts along the way towards something else, a different truth. Perhaps each sphere of focus is a kind of church, mirror or handball court.

Places or processes through which I have internalized an awareness or even a truth which I could only have arrived at via these various preceding insights.

What the heck am I getting at? I think maybe, just maybe, all the sleights, clever words, audience interaction and self-analysis have been a parade of much needed guides, security blankets, training wheels, crutches, parables, echoes, canvases and gymnasiums.

And as for the years spent in front of a mirror and in front of responsive audiences, I feel as if only now I am beginning to get a vague sense of what was staring back at me from the mirror and the eyes of the audience all this time.

Being able to make a pack of cards dance is reassuring and beautiful, orchestrating magical effects is marvelous, mystifying other people is enormously satisfying, and thinking of myself as an accomplished and credible magician is very gratifying, but all of those things are dwarfed by something else: the energy, intelligence and creativity living inside each of us.

To be able to “tune into” this seminal vitality, and at the same time inspire others to unconsciously reveal their own true vital selves, and for us all to share, in those few moments, the truth that being alive together is magic, is for me, real magic.

## ENCOURAGING CO-CREATION

*"The beautiful moments in theatre always come from a desire on the part of artist and audience to live in the moment- to commit themselves to time." - David Mamet*

Audiences are thrilled by the experience of having an overt impact on the direction, pace or tone of a show. This can be something as small as exchanging a few words with the performer or as large (and funny) as the performer suddenly stopping in the middle of the trick, throwing the cards in the air and going on to another effect, all in response to something an audience member just did or said.

Being responsive is one of the most powerful attributes a performer can possess. It sends a message of receptivity, avid interest and emotional security back to the audience.

In such cases, the performer is clearly not just going through the motions of his routines, but is actively playing with the audience. He is profoundly open to feedback and to allowing that feedback to determine the direction of the show.

The result is theatre that is very exciting to watch and even be a part of. This is co-creating at its best, invariably resulting in an unusually memorable, shared experience.

You can also encourage co-creation on a subtler and in some ways more powerful level. For example, all too often magicians have a fixed idea of the so-called "effect."

Given the subjectivity of the magic experience, this is extremely presumptuous and can only serve to limit the performer's own experience of his/her own magic.

Just as a hundred people may appreciate a painting hanging in a gallery for a hundred different reasons, so too do members of the audience appreciate a magic effect in a wide variety of ways.

This is especially the case when they are encouraged, not just to witness, but to take part. Unlike stage magic, by the end of a close-up performance it is quite likely that you have exchanged glances and words with every member of the audience.

Many of the people may have even held props and been directly involved in the events. But this does not change the fact that the effects you share with your audience consist of elements and moments each member of your audience will intellectually and emotionally assemble in their own way.

Will you encourage them to make each effect their own? Or do you require that they see the effect as you do? I am an ardent believer in "selling an effect" to an audience, but by that I mean presenting only the elements that are essential to the effect and sharing them as clearly as possible.

The audience should still be given a great deal of room to interpret the effect as it suits each of them. After all, spectators perceive even a simple copper/silver routine in a variety of ways. Some focus on the vanishing of one coin, some on the appearing of the other coin, and some on the idea of the coins transforming rather than vanishing or appearing.

Go to your audience, connect, gently guide them in a direction and then let them take the wheel for a few moments. Then gently take it back for a little while. Then remove your hands and see what happens. The only thing more exciting for an audience than experiencing your magic is for them to experience the magic as at least partially theirs.



## KNOWING AND FORGETTING

*"We never do anything well until we cease to think about the manner of doing it." – William Hazlitt*

There are many kinds of knowledge including intellectual, emotional, intuition and even body knowledge. An example of this last kind is when your hands can be said to "know" a move so well that the mind can forget it.

With magic, there are four main kinds of knowing. First, through reading about an effect as described in a book you gain an intellectual understanding of the routine and its method.

Second, when you practice the effect you begin to foster a physical relationship with the routine. By then fleshing it out into a full presentation through rehearsal, your understanding moves to a third level. And finally, the performing of the routine for an audience results in the fourth kind of knowing.

Strangely, the goal of these "knowings" is to forget, at least on a conscious level, the how and why of the effect. Only when such specifics have vanished from your mind will you be able to give all of yourself to the performance. Learn well; then forget.

What is left in place of all that knowledge? Connection and confidence. Only when you can free your mind from the brute mechanics of the effect and the nuances of your script will you be able to begin to experience one of the truly mystical parts of the entire process.

Focusing. Focusing on what? Actually, that is not quite the kind of focusing I have in mind. This is not a union birthed by separation.

You know how you sometimes feel before a performance? Part nervousness and part something else? With a great deal of experience the nervousness will subside, leaving you just with that something else.

Namely, a focused consciousness as a result of you gathering your energy. This focused, prepared and gently expectant energy is the best performance fuel you will ever have.

But here is the really challenging part. The enormous amount of experience usually required to hush your nervousness can also run the risk of dulling your passion for magic.

All too many experienced magi become jaded and no longer get a kick out of performing magic.

## EXPOSURE, APPRECIATION AND EDUCATION

*"Only the educated are free." – Epictetus*

I love magic and would very much like the general public to be able to appreciate it more than they are currently able to. I say "able to" because, how can they appreciate something that they know so little about?

Note that I am not suggesting they cannot enjoy magic without learning a little bit more about it, just as you and I are able to enjoy a concert of traditional East Indian music without knowing about the history, cultural background, common themes, etc.

However, inherent in the notion of appreciation is the idea of having a modicum of understanding about the subject.

This is why merely exposing magic methods cannot yield a true appreciation of magic any more than removing the covering cloth from a collection of medical instruments yields an appreciation of what it is to be a surgeon.

Instead of coarse and simple-minded exposures of the mechanical means behind magic effects, I believe in sharing with the general public some of the things we ourselves love about the art of magic.

In response to this, many magicians have said to me, "If they know how it is done they will lose interest." This ancient cliché smacks of a zillion romantic comedies where one of the lovers is convinced that if the other lover "finds out the truth about me, they will fall out of love!"

Of course, by the end of the movie, not only has the truth been revealed, but the greater honesty yields greater intimacy, which in turn yields understanding and finally, true appreciation. (Note that the instances where things do not play out "happily ever after" are when it is revealed that the lover is a thief or unfaithful.)

Many magicians treat the secret mechanics behind their effects as the beginning and end of their magic. Why? Because all too often it is! Little wonder they protect these secrets as if they were gold.

Bear in mind, those among us who appreciate magic only as a collection of gimmicks and secret methods will typically assume that the general public is only able to appreciate magic for the same narrow reasons.

As for the rest of us who love magic for an ocean of reasons apart from gimmicks and secret methods, it is the height of arrogance (as well as extremely cynical) to believe that the general public is unable to appreciate magic for the same reasons we do!

## CLOTHING

*"Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes." – Henry David Thoreau*

For me, the ideal performance clothing is a pair of loose-fitting, black linen pants, a collared dress shirt and a dark colored vest. Casually formal, comfortable and distinctive without drawing too much attention to itself (or me).

I own a few different vests, custom tailored with two small outer pockets on each side and an inner breast pocket on both sides, making for a total of six pockets. Each of the outside pockets are just wide enough and deep enough to hold a deck of poker-sized cards, and the inside breast pockets are both a little deeper and wider.

I work with my shirt sleeves neatly rolled up to just below the elbow. To my mind, for a magician to work with his sleeves down is ridiculous. It plays far too neatly into the whole, "it's up his sleeve" cliché.

Even when I used to wear a blazer, I would always pull up the sleeves a few inches and hold them in place with two rubber bands hidden in the folds at the elbows.

Unless I am planning on performing an effect with a card case, I leave the case at home and carry the loose pack of cards in my right front pants pocket. I also keep a magic marker in my shirt or inside breast pocket.

For several years I was in the habit of carrying the marker in my left front pants pocket until, on more than one occasion, I discovered that the marker was resting at an odd angle and rumors had begun to circulate among the guests.

## MAGICIAN VS. ENTERTAINER

*"Acting is not about showing my presence or displaying my technique. Rather, it is about revealing 'something else,' something that the audience doesn't encounter in daily life." – Yoshi Oida*

It has long been in vogue to say, "I'm not a magician, I'm an entertainer." I have great respect for the audience-centric sentiment behind the statement, but I have little patience with those who use the same statement to justify their lack of commitment to polishing and refining their abilities as magicians.

No two performers rehearse in quite the same way, but when it comes to practice, there is just no way of avoiding the hours and hours of repetitive actions. It is not enough to "be willing" to practice. You have to love it. If you do not, I suggest that magic may not be for you.

As true as it is that a performance of magic can be a form of entertainment, magic is distinct from the many other forms of entertainment, and it must be if the word "magic" is to have any meaning at all.

As magicians, we very seldom sing, dance, peel off our clothing or play musical instruments. We also rarely deliver lengthy monologues and even when some of us do, they are accompanied with the performance of an illusion or two.

And as for telling jokes, many in our ranks do combine magic with comedy (including myself), but I think it is important to ask yourself, "Are the jokes there to compliment my magic or are the jokes really the goal of my performance?"

If the answer is the latter, you are not a magician. You are a comic who also does a few tricks.

I am extremely proud and very grateful to be a magician and when I leave a venue, as entertaining as I very much hope people found me to be, I want them to think of me as a magician first and an entertainer second.

## TENSION, EXPECTATION AND RELEASE

*"The only thing that keeps the audience in their seat is wondering, 'What's going to happen next?'" – David Mamet*

Tension is often thought of as an enemy of the performance and in regards to such things as verbal presentation, body language and sleight-of-hand this is quite true.

However, tension is also one of the performer's primary allies. As you wave your hand over the deck and then pause for just a beat before turning over the top card, that fleeting moment is precisely about creating tension.

When we exaggerate a pause before delivering the last line of a sentence, we are once again cultivating a kind of tension. Even when we close our eyes and "concentrate for a moment" (typically during a mentalist effect) we create tension.

The tension created in these examples is partially a result of sparked audience expectation. An established rhythm is suddenly broken or a stream of information is stopped before a sense of completion is arrived at.

Tension also rushes into the unexpected "empty spaces," (or perhaps rather bleeds out of them) as a result of curiosity, a first cousin to expectation. The audience suddenly feels the seminal question, "What is about to happen?" wriggling in their bones.

This question is somewhat different from the question, "What is going to happen next?" insofar as the first question reflects an awareness of being on the brink of a significant event.



Or to put it more precisely, the audience experiences the magician signaling that something important is just about to occur. This tension inspires heightened focus, expectation, curiosity and even wonder.

Releasing this tension is another craft in itself. While tension can be built up over a few beats, several minutes or -in the case of a film- a couple of hours, I am a big believer in releases that take but an instant.

Having blown up a “balloon of tension,” I advise you burst it with as short and sharp a needle as you dare. And be sure to burst it with a sudden, confident and fully committed jab. This is the audience's moment for cathartic release and the more clear and crisp the climax, the larger and more satisfying the release will be.

Transitioning between tension and release is a tad more slippery subject. I have shared my preference for a sudden, explosive release, but in practice, as sudden as it may be, I do not want this release to come as a complete surprise.

Imagine talking to someone who is irked at you, then experiencing him as becoming angry and then suddenly furious.

From a theatrical perspective, I think it is far more effective for you to see the murderous glint in their eye a moment before you feel the slap across your face, rather than being taken totally by surprise by the attack.

First the build-up of tension, then the hint at impending release, and finally the release.

In the same way, to wave your hand over the pack then reach down and turn the top card face up to reveal the selection is all well and good.

Tension followed by release. But to my mind, it is nowhere near as effective as waving your hand, reaching down to the pack, pushing the card an inch off the deck with the left thumb as the right thumb and fingers take hold of the right side of the card, pausing half a beat with an air of promise and then turning over the card!

As a theatrical rule of thumb and with an eye towards an unbroken building of tension to the moment of climax, I suggest you perform the three parts of the piece in decreasing lengths of time.

The creating of tension taking the longest, the promise of release taking less time and the final release happening in an instant.

For example, rather than snapping my hand open to reveal a coin's disappearance, I will often open my hand finger by finger. However, this must be done in a mindful manner because if you do it too slowly you can unintentionally create a moment of tedious melodrama.

This happens when the audience "gets ahead of the effect" and the lifeblood of the performance, the audience's curiosity, evaporates.

Think of it in terms of a sheet suddenly be yanked off a mysterious object, only to reveal...a lawn chair. How perfectly anti-climactic. Likewise, when it comes to opening your hand one finger at a time, after the second finger, the remaining fingers had better pop open in a hurry.

## AN INVITATION TO WONDER

*"I write by twiddling the strings into a different tuning. I throw it open to the cosmos." – Joni Mitchell*

Just as you cannot convince someone to believe in the existence of a God, you cannot convince someone to feel wonder.

Perhaps puzzlement and even consternation, but emotions such as wonder and awe spring from an altogether different source in the human consciousness.

With such sublime emotional experiences, the most you can do is artfully invite. No amount of cajoling, foisting or "hard-selling" will turn the trick.

This is because the presence of wonder speaks as much about the audience's receptivity as it does about the performer's mysterious invitation.

This receptivity is in no small part a response to feeling safe, empowered and respected by the performer. For wonder to be a possibility, I suspect it is also necessary for spectators to feel that they are not mere witnesses to the miracles, but participants.

Successful invitations to wonder require that the technical aspects of the illusion must be, not only invisible, but completely unsuspected.

Whatever potential suspicion there happens to be in the room must be artfully dispelled. In fact, causing such suspicions to disappear may well be one of the most impressive "vanishing acts" a performer can bring about.

## LARGER TRUTHS

*"A work of art has an author and yet, when it is perfect, it has something which is anonymous about it." - Simone Weil*

A Double Lift, the relaxed face of a ballerina and the smudge of black on a painting. All three are designed to create an illusion.

The first of a single card where there are two, the second of an ease where great effort exists, and the third of a shadow (and thus dimension) on a flat canvas.

To what end are these crafts performed? The motivations vary from artist to artist, though the means in most art remain the same: illusion

Art is filled with illusions, deceptions, even lies. But what raises many creations to the level of art is that they are small lies told in the service of revealing larger truths.

What truths? Again, it depends on the perspective of the individual artist, but often these truths involve the relationships we fail to both see and honor between ourselves, each other and the world we inhabit.

Art reminds us of these relationships. However, if we do not perform our small illusions in the service of larger revelations, our small deceptions only serve a small truth. Ego. As magicians, we would do well to keep this very much in mind.

## ALL OF YOU

*"When you do something you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself." Shunryu Suzuki*

I perform the Classic Pass with all of me, or at least I try to. Or rather, that is the goal I hope to achieve without trying (because trying has a way of impeding things).

To perform a sleight, say a word or look into a spectator's eyes with all of you is to be fully focused on what you are doing at that very moment. It is a creative act. Actually, it is a creative response to a unique situation that has never before existed, and never will again.

More than anything else, at its best, close-up magic is the combination of the personalities that make that moment unique.

You can even perform the same effect twice for the same audience on the same day and they will nonetheless be two very different experiences (and this is not simply due to the audience having already seen that trick).

But how can you possibly perform a sleight with all of you and at the very same moment deliver a script with all of you and look into a spectator's eyes with all of you? That is a very good question.

Perhaps it will help if you think of the sleight, the script and the action of looking into a spectator's eyes as three clay bricks. Just as you originally had to work on the script until it was effortless, so too did you have to practice and polish the sleight.

Looking directly into the eyes of a stranger takes considerable practice as well. And of course, if you actually have to think about the sleight as you execute it, you have yet to master it. You need to practice it some more. The same applies to the words of your script and the glance.

However, once you no longer have to think about any of the individual bricks, not only will they require none of your consciousness during a performance, but you will find that their individuality dissolves and you are able to do all three at once. Or rather, be all three.

You can begin this process anywhere in the mix. With the words, the glance or the sleight. Make sure your finger placement is correct, but do not stop there. Pay attention to how smoothly your hands execute the sleight, but do not stop there.

How do your arms feel during the sleight? Are your shoulders relaxed? Consider how you want to hold your head, but do not stop there. What do you want to communicate with your face as you execute the move, say the words and meet the spectator's gaze?

From your fingers to hands to wrists to arms to shoulders to neck to throat to head to face to eyes, perform with all of you.

## UNPRESENTATIONS

*"How you play a note is just as important as what that note is." – Henry Kaiser*

Zen masters often strive to achieve a stillness and clarity of mind analogous to an undisturbed lake without even a ripple moving across its surface.

Imagine a spectator's mind as a still lake and that everything you say and do as a performer, even a single syllable or the smallest of gestures, is a stone dropped from shoulder height into that lake. This is the manner in which many of us introduce information to our audiences.

However, I have found that the stones I am able to softly slip into this lake of consciousness, smaller stones released a fraction of an inch above the water's surface, are often the most effective.

A classic example of this is to have a card selected, returned to the pack, then a moment later when you cut to a card, instead of deliberately turning the card face-up for everyone to see you have "missed," casually gesture with the card in such a way as to give the audience a glimpse at it while leaving the impression that not only was this unplanned, but that you are not even aware you did it.

Then when you secretly switch the card for their selection, the effect is devastating.

Why do such small gestures or subtle turns of phrases yield a disproportionate influence? I believe it is because information imparted in a less than obvious fashion is above suspicion.

By gracefully slipping the information, perspective or even attitude into the waters of their experience, almost without a trace of its origins, the stone falls further and is unconsciously embraced in a manner quite different than when the information is "presented."

On the other hand, stones that are suddenly dropped or hurled into the lake with great fanfare can also be very effective theatre and a lot of fun.

Bold presentations and larger-than-life gestures have their place as well, at least in my theatre. But for long-term impact, for magic moments that last in the minds of the spectators/participants for the rest of their lives, there is much to be said for the more gently handled stones.

They require a different deftness, less like the throwing of a stone and more akin to the planting of a seed.



## ENDING

*"A good ending helps you find a good beginning." - Yoshi Oida*

Leave them with mysteries, not puzzles. Leave them impressed by both your skill and your modesty. And most of all leave them with a strong sense of magic.

One of the ways I strive to achieve this is by ending my performance with an extremely powerful piece of magic, waiting a few beats for the effect to crystallize, and then silently taking my leave.

Sometimes I will make a point of saying, "Thank you very much," and other times I will glance into everyone's eyes and give a friendly nod, but the important thing to me is to not soften the blow of the final routine or mute the impossible moment by chatting for a few minutes before moving onto the next group of people.

It is another subtle art inside our art, knowing how to take your leave without seeming in any way brusque. And to make matters even more complicated, I also believe it is extremely important to give your audience a chance to thank you.

Not only is it polite, I think it is a very powerful part of the entire performer/audience dynamic.

However, giving them this opportunity and graciously receiving whatever gratitude they want to express need not take more than a few moments.

And you will find, for your part, it is much better expressed with the eyes and a smile than with words.

Finally, try in some way to acknowledge the fact that you have all just shared special time together.

Granted, this is a great deal to try to convey, especially without more than a word or two, but if you hold these thoughts and intentions in your mind as you take your leave, with practice you will find that every sentiment will resonate with your audience. Intimate theatre is sublime.

## RE: CREATION

*"When the chord changes, you should change." - Joe Pass*

It is not uncommon for an aspiring stand-up comic's first performance to be very successful. This is typically followed by a series of absolutely dreadful shows, leaving the neophyte more than a little confused.

This shift in response is usually due to a fundamental shift in the performer's attitude from one of creating to recreating.

In stand-up comedy, as in magic, the best shows seem fresh and unscripted. These theatrical experiences are transcendent because the actor has been able to transcend the script, even as he or she delivers sentences written months or even years before.

In the case of the beginner stand-up comic, his first performance seems marvelously fresh because it is. The performer appears to be firmly rooted in the here and now, fully present, wonderfully vital and responding to the audience because every moment on that stage is among his very first. This is no illusion or impressive feat of acting.

But then it comes to the second, third and fourth show, and what does the green comic do? The most natural thing in the world. He attempts to recreate the vitality and experience of his first time.

And for the majority of young comics, the results are disastrous because they lack the tools needed to deliver the same material, in varying venues, for varying audiences with consistently satisfying results.

For the comic, part of this necessary collection of performance tools is a script featuring jokes that have been first written and edited, then delivered and polished in front of hundreds of live audiences.

In much the same way, the professional magician needs a repertoire of effects which have also been, not just "audience tested," but ideally molded by the enormously lush feedback spectators/participants have to offer.

But just as lifeless logs are not enough to create a blazing fire, so too are these routines necessary but far from sufficient to create stellar shows.

To give truly sublime performances on a regular basis, the magician requires other, less obvious tools, chief among them a fervent desire to connect with his audience.

Along with this yearning, the magician also needs to both understand and accept that the most memorable of performances have an air of discovery about them, no less for the actor than the audience.

Instead of trying to recreate a remembered feeling, experience or performance, the magician must walk on stage bare, despite his nimble hands, full pockets and memorized scripts.

Bare, but far from empty. After all, if you greeted your audience as an empty shell, that would hardly inspire and excite.

Just as greeting them mentally filled to the brim with a twelve minute and twenty-two second script ready to be fired at them like so much water from a fireman's hose cannot possibly yield an exhilarating creative experience for the audience or yourself.

But even the greatest practitioners fall prey to the numbing routine of countless shows and find themselves performing "routines." In stand-up comedy this is referred to as, "phoning in your set." A script you have delivered a thousand times performed in an utterly lackluster fashion.

I have many times found myself in the middle of just such a show and one of the ways I break myself free from this static state (and simultaneously "birth" an authentic performance) is to push my consciousness towards something unique to the situation.

This is often a person, though sometimes it might be a sign on a wall, a ceiling fan, the music playing over the sound system, even the pattern of the carpet. Something of that moment, shared by everyone present, perfectly of that place and time.

To further root me in that moment, I will also often comment on the decor or ask a person a question I have never asked anyone before. Something, anything that will act as a splash of cold water on my face and bring me back to where I really am.

Other times, to break the killing spell of the rote, I will immediately launch into an effect I have only ever performed a handful of times or try to share a more familiar effect in total silence or perhaps while just whistling.

Whenever you feel disconnected from your audience and your material, stop what you are doing and try something else (such lifeless moments may well pay the rent, but they will not enrich your audience or yourself, nor further any artistic aspirations).

Only when you are fully present can your performance be an act of creation.

All other moments are instances of recreation and, as effective as they can be, they will always pale in comparison to the vitality and joy inherent in truly creative theatrical moments.

To put an even finer point on it, because you are never anywhere else but where you are, and you are never truly in any moment but the present (despite where your consciousness may wander) you cannot possibly recreate anything. There is really only creation and compromised creation.

In this sense, there is only painting and painting while squinting. As always, the choice is yours.

## IT TAKES TIME

*"Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet." Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

There is no rushing the process. Impatience will get you no further along your path. More likely, impatience will slow you down.

However, there are things you can do which, though not expediting your journey, will deepen your experience of it while also adding immeasurably to your satisfaction.

As you practice, rehearse, perform and study, remain conscious and aware. Do not rehearse in front of the television. Instead, give your craft and creative development the focus and respect they deserve.

As you study, read, watch videos, attend lectures, and of course perform, always try to remain undistracted and intent on exactly what it is you are doing.

Also, keep in mind what you are trying to achieve and accept that anything worth doing takes time. Yes it is a cliché, but that makes it no less true. Trust that you are indeed on your way, every day a little closer.

Lastly (and I admit that I personally am not very good with this one) be sure to enjoy all that you have accomplished up to this point. This is one of the true keys to a successful and satisfying career.

## A NEW MAGIC

*"All successful revolutions are the kicking in of a rotten wooden door." - John Kenneth Galbraith*

My wife Lisa and I once had a marvelously heated discussion about magic in Edinburgh. She is great that way, in that she is supportive, curious and always open for an emotional exchange.

Given my tendency to shy away from my own emotional side, she is my perfect companion.

I was trying to describe to her a "different kind of magic," a magic of the future, a magic that I myself still do not have a perfectly clear picture of.

But this much I do know: it is beyond the clichés, the stereotypes and prejudices dogging the magic of today. It is also practiced by creative, self-expressive men and women, and the driving force behind the performances is not "fooling people" or "blowing them away."

I was excitedly struggling to describe this future magic to Lisa when she jumped in and asked, "But if we aren't fooled, how can it be magic?" She tends to ask extremely good questions and this was no exception.

In a passionate rush I cited how, when you slip a straight stick into a clear pond, the stick looks bent even though you know it is just a wonderfully convincing illusion.

And I referred to the many times I have witnessed an audience express heartfelt disapproval when a ventriloquist slipped a plastic bag over the head of his dummy to suffocate it.



(And no, these audiences were not just "playing along." They sincerely cared, if not about the dummy, then at least about the cruel display.)

And finally, I suggested that this new magic might be as different from how magicians typically perform today as Cubism was from the traditional "realistic" landscapes and portraits that came before it.

When the general public first encountered the abstract cubist images, many declared that, not only was it "not art," it was not even painting! ("You can't make out what it is supposed to be!")

Perhaps this new magic will meet with a similar response, but instead of the argument revolving around the issue of realism, it will revolve around the issue of deception and of "fooling people."

I do not know what this new magic will look like, but I believe it will be a direct result of three things:

First, magicians studying, practicing, creating and performing their magic as a means of self-expression.

This will require a radical change from the "paint-by-numbers" attitude held in all sectors of our community from the creators, marketers and lecturers to the students, hobbyists, theorists and professionals.

As a result, a much greater onus will be put on originality.

Second, magicians shifting their focus from mechanical method to theatrical effect.

This will necessitate a profound re-evaluation of our thinking in regards to the role our audiences play in our performances, as well as moving away from demonstrations of skill or power, challenging attitudes and appeals to the puzzle mind-set.

And third, as a result of witnessing these seminal shifts in focus, thinking and work, the general public will shift their own attitudes and expectations in regards to magic and magicians.

Of course, every time a magician performs for an audience, it is an opportunity for the attitudes of both to evolve and influence each other. Though ultimately, we are in the best position to at least begin this profound transformation.

## EFFECTS ONLY HAPPEN IN THE PAST

*"Who controls the past," ran the Party slogan, "controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." - George Orwell, 1984*

When it comes to both creating and performing magic, the audience's experience/perception is an integral part of the process and, in some senses, it is even the "holding place" of the magical experience.

When an audience and I are really connected and we are all having a wonderful time, I too am able to experience wonder. However, it is not the wonder of the effects per se, but rather the wonder of how the effects can be such an incredible catalyst for a transcendent collective experience.

Strictly in regards to the effects, they do not so much happen in my mind as in the minds of the audience. Before I perform them, they exist as mental maps, a collection of ideas and goals.

During the performance, they are raised from the dead, from the potential to the actual, and they exist, fleshed out, though only for an instant.

After that, the effects live on solely in the minds of the audience. They are "the affected." There can be no effect without an audience, for how can you create or leave an effect on nobody?

Philosophy aside, I also believe it is powerfully pragmatic to be an audience-centric performer and thinker. This is not about giving away power, but actually about accessing power.

As for the idea that effects only happen in the past, I believe this is another point which, though decidedly philosophical can yield significant "real world fruit." Given that it takes time for light and sound to travel from any object to our eyes and ears, it follows that we exist in a world of "past objects."

In other words, our sensual experience of the world around us is always a fraction of a second "behind."

Strange as it may seem, this even applies to our sense of touch because as undetectable as it may be to our human senses, it takes time, however slight, for the sensory information to travel from the nerve endings in the tips of our fingers to our brains. So even here, there is a time lapse.

With all this in mind, it is not surprising that all magic effects, though experienced in the present, immediately become citizens of the past. Memories. Memory is a very important part of magic.

It is only mystifying that the signed card is resting on top of the pack if you recall it was slowly slipped into the middle of the pack a few moments before. Memory makes an appreciation of changing events possible, putting them in a context.

As for the "real world fruit" I promised, given that effects exist in the memories of our audience and given that memories can be influenced, coaxing shifts in people's recollections of effects can be a very effective way to enhance an effect. To literally make it more powerful than it "really" was.

In this way, we have an opportunity to create an effect, before, during and after it has "really" happened.

(Sorry about the continued use of the quotation marks around the word "really," but I feel it is important for me to draw attention to the erroneous implication that effects can exist apart from the minds of the audience. There is nothing whatsoever objective about an effect. It is a purely subjective construct.)

There are many ways to "frame" an effect in the minds of your audience. One of my favorite techniques is using a well-chosen word or two to exaggerate or even distort what "has just happened." Another technique involves subtly employing the human mind's tendency towards omission.

For example, when I perform my folded card in paperclip effect, I leave the folded and clipped card on the table from the very beginning of the effect.

Near the end of the effect I pick up the card, remove the clip and lower my hands back down towards the table so that they are just a few inches from the surface.

That way, because my hands are within the same sphere of focus as the spot on the table where the folded card rested for 99% of the routine, in retrospect the audience is convinced that the folded card never left that sphere (even though it actually did, when I raised my hands to chest height, removed the paperclip and switched cards)!

In this way you can plant suggestive seeds which, when the audience waters them in their own minds, bloom into effects that, in a sense, never happened.

While I am on the subject of memory, when I unfold the signed card, I never completely unfold it.

To unfold it completely would not only deny the spectator this all-important experience, but would also completely relegate the image of the folded card to the past.

Yes, all effects end up in that strangely vital graveyard, but I want the effect-defining images that will haunt an audience for years to come to have as much time as possible to register.

And so I want the audience to have more than just a moment to not just see, but to witness the signature on the face of the card while the card is still at least partially folded.

Effects are odd things. We read about them in books and magazines and hear magicians discuss them as if they are entities unto themselves. Yet as I have suggested, in a sense they only ever exist in the past.

Then again, when you remember something, though what you are recalling is something from your past, would it not be fair to say that you are recalling that event in the present, here and now?

And when you consider that, whenever we repeatedly recall an event, it is not uncommon for us to alter it a little bit over time, it also seems fair to say that effects are never really over, never really finished. Effects are magical entities.

## THE LOVE OF MAGIC

*"Gratitude is the memory of the heart." – Jean Baptiste Massieu*

We love what we can identify with, what responds to us, what we respond to and what we have allowed inside us, and what, once inside, takes root and blooms.

For me, this has been magic. It has given me so much. I love magic. I love the idea of it, the practicing and, with the right audience, the performing. With the wrong audience, I still love magic, but the performance frustrates and even saddens me.

Magic is so amazing, the way it can make people feel, the way it can make me feel, the excitement, the mystery, the fun, the intimacy. I am one of the truly blessed.

To love something so much, to become a slave to it and the moment the key is turned and the shackles snap shut, to feel your feet leave the ground, to feel you are flying.

What we polish shines, and I have tried so hard to polish so many things in this life, but magic has taken to shining inside me like nothing else I have ever known. Magic has been the gift of my life. I am so grateful for all it has given me.

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