Absolute Magic

A Model for Powerful Close-Up Performance

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H&R
MAGIC BOOKS

Author's Note

Those of you who have seen me perform will be aware that I have moved away from conjuring material to work with the area of our profession that deals with mind reading and psychological effects. This type of performance has always interested me more, and the development of genuine hypnotic, suggestive and persuasive skills has come to mean more to me than learning sleight-of-hand.

This is, however, a book about the presentation of more traditional magic, which constitutes my background and is still something I enjoy immensely. The reader will detect a strong leaning towards mental effects in my writing, but although much will be said to interest the mentalist, this book is not designed to be purely about such things. Mind reading, for me, is immensely personal: the style and approach I developed were born from my feelings towards the presentation of magic as a whole. I tend to keep the details of methods to myself in this area: I would hope to let my performance efforts speak for themselves.

If a non-magician has found his way to this book through Her Majesty's Internet and wishes to know how I perform my mind-reading or learn more about 'mind control' techniques, he will be very disappointed, and infuriated by the fact that he had to pay such an unreasonable amount of money to be so let down. If a magician has picked this up to learn some new tricks, then again he has been misguided in his expectations, for I don't teach any here. I hope what I have to say will be of more value.

This is a book about powerful close-up conjuring, and I imagine it will be the last word I shall offer on the subject for a while. My interest in the psychological aspects of magic, combined with my desire to utilise my *other* background as a hypnotist, has led me to new waters. But I felt there was still much I had to say on the subject of commercial close-up magic, and I trust it will be of interest to the keen performer.

Derren Brown
Havana
2001

Brief Notes on the Second Edition

December 2002

I was tempted, as with *Pure Effect*, to remove a couple of chapters from this printing just to cause the same kind of *furore*. But I didn't.

I feel it worth clarifying that since writing this book, my move into performing only 'psychological illusions' has seemed to me to be a progression – probably in part my way of resolving the frustrations I felt with magic, which come through in these pages. Of course given the nature of my television work it would have been incongruous and confusing to continue to include conjuring in my repertoire. I should add that I have never for a moment missed it.

However, in that the following work was written at the peak of my involvement with traditional magic, and because my 'psychological' material is still born from the same beliefs and passions set out here, I hope it stands as a worthwhile volume on the subject.

A couple of important notes. Some people took exception to jokes made in the first edition about the character of Guy Hollingworth. When this was brought to my attention I realised my comments had certainly been misjudged. I'd like to state publicly that Guy does not snort, nor has ever snorted, cocaine before performing or indeed at any other time, and that he is not even the vulgar, flatulent ragamuffin that I occasionally and ironically portray him as here. He is a gentleman and a friend, and apart what seems to me to be a

disappointing taste in music there's nothing I can say against him. Apologies for any embarrassment caused.

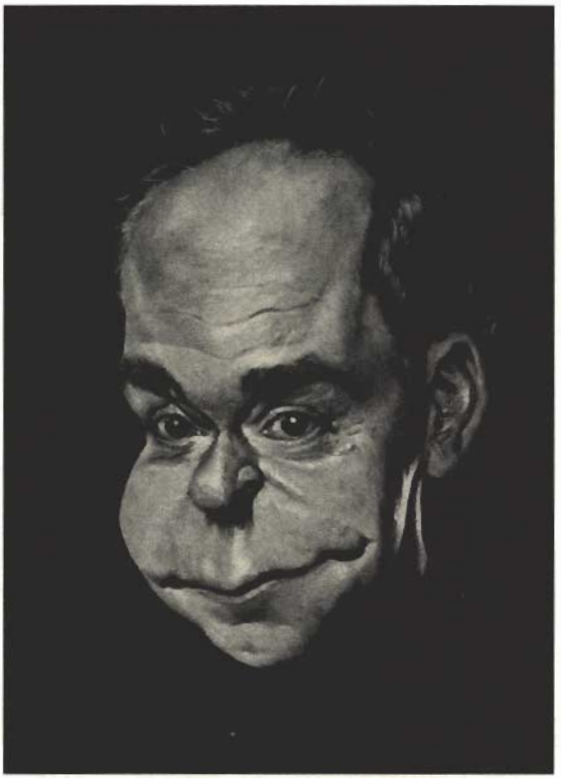
On a similar note, it was also mentioned to me that an indelicately turned phrase regarding the superb performer Noel Britten's employment of Stanislavski's "Magic *If*" had caused offence to a few people. Upon re-reading it, I realised it could be taken to mean the opposite of what I intended. I wrote that he had employed the technique 'doubtless unawares,' meaning only *unconsciously*: I wanted to credit his superlative intuition as a performer in absorbing this technique and making it second nature (as it seemed to me), but inadvertently suggested that he was just plain ignorant of it. I hope my meaning is now clear, and I have removed the ambiguous phrase. Apologies.

Some have complained that I use unnecessarily vulgar language, especially at the very start of this book. I would simply refer the reader to the first draft edition of *Tarbell*, which was littered with indelicate cartoons, lewd references to Mrs. Tarbell, and rife with the language of the cloaca. No one got upset about that.

I have made one or two other changes, which irritated me from the first edition, and generally speaking these are all typographical.

Other than that, this book is splendid.

This book is dedicated to my friend Teller, whose eloquent and erudite correspondence gave shape to my understanding of the relationship between magic and theatre. I think no one understands that dynamic more than he, nor creates magic as artistically resonant. This book has its genesis in his thoughts.



For Your Reading Pleasure

Preface

Having emerged, disillusioned and visibly upset from the gruelling, unhappy period of my life that constituted writing *Pure Effect*, already described by the *London Evening Vagina* as 'this sweaty mouth-load of faggy arse-gag,' I am pleased to announce to you, the angry reader, that you hold once again in your hands or feet a collection of my personal choice of words, chosen from my brain and mind, blobbed together into sentence-children and allowed to play violently with each other to form a kind of enormous word-idea, wrapped around cut-up paper and weighing about the same as a fat hamster.

Madonna, surely the world's best female performer after Jeff McBride, once said to me, "Out. Get out." Her words have come to form the backbone of this book, which I know has been a massive conceptual challenge for the printers. As is common with writers, an affection has grown in my heart for this work. My passing it to you is an intimate moment of sharing: in many ways like a sex-act of ideas, except without all that fumbling and flatulence and the girl not being able to find your wotsit.

The aim of this book is to set out, quite unapologetically, a model for performing magic in such a way that it feels real to the spectator – even though he may intellectually rationalise it later. In order to do this, it is not enough for me to provoke questions in your mind: I must describe the idea that I have, an idea that is borne of my own passions and beliefs. On the one hand I know it to be only my set of answers, and I know that any serious performer out there could never make his own magic entirely fit the model I describe. Yet set it out I must, for I would like this to read as something of a tract: a record of my thoughts as I see them now, rather than a series of

disparate essays on presentation. However, I am wary of being presumptuous.

I can only talk about my magic, and the vision of magical performance that I have. In exploring my particular vision, I will have to move from discussion of an ideal, to the role that the ideal has in actual performance. It is not my place to dictate what is right or wrong in magic – I am, I repeat, merely setting out my own model, albeit it one which is founded on some strong opinions.

So do not mistake my apparent singleness of vision for a conviction that I have found The Way. I am merely describing a journey, and trying to be as honest as possible about it. I am still young and handsome, and realise that in future years I may look back on this book and cringe. But it feels right now, as I push thirty.

So if I appear to be demarcating your creativity, then pay me no attention. Step back a bit and see it for what it is: just my current understanding of our wonderful profession. These things are what I passionately believe, and I can only set them out with the conviction that they inspire in me and the importance that they have in my life. Make of them what you will, and take from them what speaks to you.

I wish you all the best with your magic and hope that you constantly re-discover it.

Part One:

Aims and Priorities

In most magic, as far as I can see, the plot is, "I wish for something. I get it. And it's what I want (though many right-thinking persons might well ask 'What earthly use does that raucous geezer have for a dove?')"

The "cause" in this case is the "magician's will." He wills it; it comes true.

This is not a drama about a human being. It is the depiction of a god, generally a capricious and trivial one. And it's just as dull as the biography of any omnipotent being would be. It contains not a smidgen of genuine conflict (again, think of standard card-fan productions, however proficient). And without this conflict, the magician in a position of god-like power at all times has not a flicker of humanity.

... Now, lest you think I'm talking about staging everything as a "magic play" (which generally revolt me) let me say at once: to be true conjuring, the scene must be here in the theatre or the cabaret or the room; the time must be now at 7:10 p.m. Philadelphia time. The characters must, at least in some sense, include the magician, the audience, the stagehands, ideally the security guard. Here and now is all part of the grammar of this art form.

Teller - from our conversations, Feb 2000

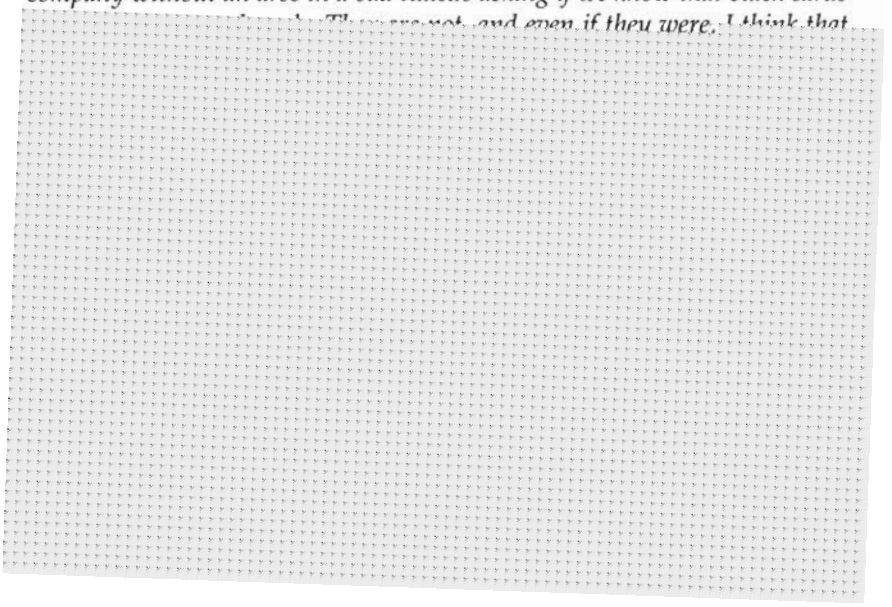
Act I *Scene I*

Enter Godot

Starting Points

"Excuse me, Sir, but did you lose a white penknife?"

And with these words, the magic fell stillborn from the womb. From then on, there was only tolerance. Excuse me, you rude, shabby man, we are enjoying an evening together. I think it not unreasonable to expect that we could enjoy our meal and each other's company without an arse in a bad tuxedo asking if we know that black cards



ham-fisted ways of approaching groups, and an eagerness to bludgeon the spectators with magic before they are ready. This is the activity of a performer who sees the problem, and solves it by figuratively hiding behind his props. Later, we grow in confidence, and see that the space of our spectator groups should be respected. So we develop more natural ways of introducing ourselves, and rather than hiding, allow our personalities to show. If this personality is pleasant, honest yet theatrically honed, then it will allow the group to feel confident in the performance, and to enjoy the experience rather than resent it. A skilled performer will pride himself on his rapport skills, and his ability to blend in with any group, and adapt to their demands and preferences as a group.

However, my understanding of resonant magic and its relationship to theatre means that this more 'confident' stage is flawed and incomplete. It is wrong to focus on that ability to adapt to any group. This is a worthwhile skill to have, and infinitely preferable to the former option, but I would suggest that the first key to powerful performance, and to creating the experience of real magic, is precisely that you make your group adapt to *you*. Now please don't misunderstand this. You must develop the ability, if you don't already possess it, of making any group feel comfortable, and learn to read their cues and desires in such a way that you can tailor certain aspects of your performance to them. Approaching a group cold, your first task will be to get them to like you and feel comfortable in your company. I feel that at this point, a natural ability with people is essential. But once that rapport has been established, and you have gently come into their space with the respect that deserves, it is now fundamental to serious magic that you reverse the dynamic and make the space yours: that it now becomes a serious performance area, on your terms. Only when you have your audiences eager to see what you will do and happy to

stop what they are doing and pay attention according to your rules, will the foundations be laid for magic that reverberates with wonder.

What, after all, is the alternative? Magic, I suppose, that merely fools. Missing from the scenario where the magician tries to fit in with what he perceives the demands and preferences of his group to be, is any sense of creating and sustaining a dynamic, of performer *qua* performer and audience *qua* audience. There is only a trick, and no one is even being told that it's important. Our friend at the bar or our group at the table expects little and gets little, and magic means nothing.

This controlling of the dynamic from the outset, and the management of spectator response to which it leads, is a fundamental notion upon which my ideas are based, and I will return to them in detail later. For now, it is enough to say that my understanding of the role of 'theatre' and of magical dramaturgy begins with understanding performance space, and an acute awareness of the dynamics between performer and audience.

I am not talking about drama that replaces magic. Magic is our end goal, and my consideration here is how to create magic that feels real and is as strong as possible. I believe that a certain dramatic sensibility in the structuring and performance of effects is fundamental in achieving this, but I am not suggesting that achievement of dramatic effect is the greater goal: drama must support the magic, not vice-versa.

Darwin Ortiz warns against this in his marvellous work, *Strong Magic*:

> "While every magic trick tells a story, it's important to realise that the prime goal of magic is not to tell a story but to *create a sensation*... Some of the magicians and magical writers most concerned with presentation make the mistake of thinking that the point of a magic effect is to support a dramatic premise, much like theatrical effects or film special effects do...
>
> If, however, our fundamental premise is correct that the unique strength of magic is that it gives the audience the experience of confronting the impossible, it follows that the point of a dramatic presentation is to enhance the magic. The magic is not there to validate a dramatic premise, the dramatic premise is used to add impact to the magic, to make the experience of the impossible that much more powerful."

I agree with this, and many of us have seen routines which tell an atmospheric and dramatic story to the accompaniment of a magical routine. I find these presentations ultimately quite alienating. Aside from misplacing the focus of performance, they remind the spectator that he is watching a scripted miniature *act*, as opposed to watching something resonant and real. And too often, the weighty story is pretentiously disproportionate to the 'trick' that accompanies it. Stories are told as the focus of magical routines to entertain children, because the performer knows that an entertaining story will capture their interest more than the shiver of the unreal. There is no need to continue this with such obviousness into adult magic. Despite the conviction with which the stories may be told, they are too often alienating and wearying excursions into self-apotheosis on the part of the performer.

However, Mr. Ortiz abandons the importance of drama too early. While he goes on to talk much about such issues as suspense and character, I think that the issue of dramatic resonance unifies many

disparate ideas and brings much into focus. It leads ultimately to a kind of histrionic sensibility, through the exercise of which, so many of these issues will fall naturally into place.

The key here is something to which I shall return later: one of withholding. The importance of keeping the grandeur of performance withheld in such a way that it is felt rather than seen is vital to giving it substance. The mistake made by many self-styled 'dramatic' performers who are concerned most with presentation is that they manifest that dramatic sensibility too much in a way that becomes ultimately rather daft. Many, of course, may enjoy it, but it neither draws an intelligent audience in, nor creates real intrigue: it just presents a caricature. That over-manifestation of sensibility may occur in character, grooming, or over-indulgent scripting of effects. The performer is merely portraying a two-dimensional caricature of an ill-thought-out stereotype. I believe that the type of indulgent use of drama objected to by Mr. Ortiz is related to this kind of nonsense.

The alternative that I suggest is a histrionic realisation that takes place quietly beneath the surface, withheld but felt by the audience in a way that they would find difficult to parody. And at this level, drama is of fundamental importance. In his *The Work Of Art Of The Future*, Wagner writes:

> "Every branch of art addresses the *understanding* only to the extent that its core – only the relation of which man or its derivation from man can animate and justify the work of art – is maturing towards *drama*. All artistic creativity becomes universally intelligible, wholly understood and justified to the extent that it passes over into drama, that it is inwardly illuminated by drama."

As long as we are creating magic and not opera, the issue remains of how to sustain this chthonic dramatic stratum correctly, unpretentiously, effectively. In many ways, that is the subject matter of this book. It leads to two clear areas for consideration: the designing of routines with a sense of dramatic structure in mind, and the creation of a character with the same dramatic sensibility behind it. When character and performance are fused with a magical effect in a celebration of elegant and subtle theatrical awareness, the experience of real magic is born.

One of the interesting aspects of considering magic theory is that, like most of the arts, theory pursues practice, rather than follows it. The Greek theatre's brightest period was in the fifth century BC, but Aristotle's *Poetics*, the grand work of dramatic theory, did not follow until late into the fourth century. Throughout theatrical history, theorising has been slow to follow theatrical output, and the great authors have been, in the main, reluctant to wax theoretical about their works, aside from a few snippets of *obiter dicta* here and there in occasional prefaces. In magic performance, there is no room for empty theorizing: unless the principles involved have a real and reliable effect on the spectator, they have no value. Magic is an entirely pragmatic art. Writing in the fifties, Friederich Dürrenmatt noted that "in art, anything is possible as long as it works." (*Theatre Problems, 1954-5*). Infusing magic with the notions that I concern myself with in this book has no value unless they work, and do so in that they extend the magic beyond the experience of trickery and deception, which is my aim.

I am not considering other performance aims held by magicians that use magic to promote specialised concepts. Gospel Magic, Motivational Magic, Trade Show Magic – these things do not interest me within the scope of this book. Magic can certainly be used to

promote a socio-ethical programme, but I find the very idea quite perverse. Horace raised the question of whether instruction or delight should prevail in drama. In magic we have a variety of 'uses' for our art beyond magic itself, which reminds me of the notion of 'art therapy.' The rendering of art inferior to therapy is an interesting one: interesting in the sense that it makes me want to vomit angrily. Therapy is one possible product of art: if a work speaks to a troubled individual in its perfection or inspires another to improve some aspect of their life, then a good thing may have happened, but art is indifferent to us, separate and concrete, though borne from very human passions. Good art connects us with the infinite and promises to transcend the force of human experience that has necessitated it. But neither art, nor magic as art, should be subservient to the delivery of an agenda *that exists independently of the performance*, however empowering that may be for the audience. I repeat, the audience may *experience* the magic as empowering, but it is not the role of magic to promote empowerment. That can be left to the expanding number of gurus in that field. A reaction of true wonder – that peculiar experience that is part existential but primarily aesthetic – *precludes any appreciation of moral awareness.*

An agenda in magic can, however, exist that is one with the performance, where the 'higher' communication is the Greater Effect *of the performer himself* and beyond that, magic as a whole. Then every moment of bewilderment and every aspect of the performance can be ruthlessly geared to the promotion of those concepts. I will consider this at length later on, but for now it is enough to say that in my opinion, this should be the aim of making improvements and the true agenda of the performing magician.

In his essay, *Theatre Without a Conscience*, the English author Howard Barker tells the following tale which nicely demonstrates this misapplication of performance art:

> "A drama teacher, a pacifist, visited me. He told me of his production of *Antigone*, in which instead of a set he hung a massive map of the world on which every war currently being fought was illuminated by flaming red light. Of course, there were lots of these, and the actors played in the glare of them. At the end, he flung on the house lights and dragged chairs onto the stage, obliging the audience to engage in a debate on the so-called issues the production had raised. He therefore succeeded in eliminating the entire experience of the drama, humiliated the text by using it as a means to an end, a starting point for the endless curse of debating things, wrecked the invention of his actors, turning them into mere didactic instruments, and liquidated any possibility in the audience that their structure of feeling and thought could be inflamed by what they had witnessed – he had reduced the non-cerebral event of a play into a pack of arguments."

In making this point, I am warning against what I might call 'over-presentation,' the activity of some performers who rightfully wish to endow their effects with meaning but do so in a misguided fashion. Books that deal with presentational issues generally warn against having nothing to say at all and no appreciation of meaning. I want also to warn against the dangers of inappropriate saturation of meaning. I hope I have made it clear that to believe that a sense of drama and gravitas must be pushed right to the surface is a mistake. The approach to magic that trivialises it will lead to the display of transient, amusing trickery or mere masturbatory technique. The very opposite mistake is to perform an *histrionic* act of self-love that, ultimately, drips only pretension.

I reiterate, the role of drama in magic is to strengthen the feel and impact of real and resonant magic. Sometimes it will be appropriate to perform an effect 'off the cuff,' in a downplayed fashion: what one might call a whimsical act of change in the primary (i.e. the immediate) world, which seems to have no connection to a deeper stratum of hidden mystery. For example, you may walk up to a bar, pick up a teaspoon and cause it to bend. And do so as if you do that sort of thing all the time, with no sense of drama played out in the effect. Yet the dramatic element can be found in the very carefree attitude with which you play it, and the quiet self-awareness with which you create a state of total bewilderment in the observer. In other words, there may still exist considerations of character, role and audience effect in the most (apparently) whimsical performances. Dramatic sensibility, which as I have said should operate primarily at a subtle level, will guarantee that a supposedly casual display still has a powerful impact.

However, in an ideal situation, the close-up magician will take a small group and collectively transport them into the experience of wonder. Rather than an off-the-cuff demonstration, he will take the time to set the scene, and ensure that the spectators are playing their roles properly. The effect would be of a mysterious character using his esoteric talents to create a moment of real magic, one that surpassed mere trickery, and mere technique. Indeed, it would not just be a case of one man's learnt skills: rather he would be a connection for the audience to something beyond, something a little disturbing. If it were real, the magic would have to come from a place just beyond the performer, from a place to which he serves as that gateway. This is the key. When he clicks his fingers and cards change to the four aces, we know we have experienced sleight of hand. Real magic would not be quite that quick and easy. Real magic

would take investment. Real magic would draw you in, and make you nervous.

My model for understanding dramatically sound magic is as follows. The magician's role must change from a whimsical god-figure who can click his fingers and have something change in the primary world, to a hero-figure who, with his skills and intriguing character, provides a link with a secondary world of esoteric power. He must arrange circumstances in the primary world – such as the correct participation of his small audience – in such a way that if that precarious balance is held, a glimmer of magic (only just held under control for a while) will shine through and illuminate the primary world with wonder. That requires investment of time and energy from him and from his audience, and involves the overcoming of conflict. When the routine is over, something has shifted in the world, for both spectator and performer. There is a true sense of catharsis.

It would be inappropriate and laborious to make every routine in a set conform to that process, but it is something that can subtly weave in and out of a repertoire. I understand that this may sound heavy stuff indeed for a bunch of card tricks, but bear with me. Consider the shift for the role of the magician that it suggests. To be most dramatically sound, and therefore emotionally most powerful, the magic has to move out of the realm of *effect* into *cause* and effect. Into a realm where action and effort are vital. I am talking about subtle and vital changes. I am suggesting that the magician shift his role slightly to be more plausible and human, to make his magic resonate more.

If a casual bending of a teaspoon is the virtuoso caprice of the first violin, then the sustaining of tension and resolving of conflict is the

driving force of the symphony in which the delightful trill finds its context. Well-placed in routines, the whimsical display of ability can work to build or check the tension of the greater piece.

Again I reiterate, these are principles to be *subtly* applied, and are to have the aim not of creating great drama, but of involving the emotions of your audience at a greater level and providing them with an experience that feels real. Not every trick in a routine need follow this, for the need to provide an entertaining set will mean that you must shift to different modes, and to a comic rhythm of sorts to provide something wholly satisfyin$_{g}$. But if your aim is primarily to provide strong magic rather than just be a jolly entertainer, then an ultimate fundamental seriousness and plausibility will be of great importance to you.

A concrete example from my repertoire seems worthwhile at this point, in order to illustrate how these rather large ideas may be incorporated into a routine to shift it slightly into something that has, I hope, a genuinely magical effect, as opposed to one of trickery.

Many magicians, myself included at one time, perform the 'Floating Bill.' It is a beautiful trick, and has all the necessary components of a strong and memorable effect. But the effect that remains after the trick is over is "How did he do that? Was there string? I couldn't see any..." and so on. Let's examine this. When a magician floats a bill, he is playing a god-figure who can snap his fingers and make marvels happen. Any audience member over the age of six knows that he can't *really* do that. They know it's a trick, albeit a very good one, and it doesn't really pretend to be any more than that. However convincingly it is performed, a straightforward presentation of this effect will not move the spectators beyond the experience of seeing a good trick, and not knowing how it was done.

Now, let us take the potential offered by such a great trick and shift the magician's role ever so slightly so that he is no longer a god but a hero. Let us make him an intriguing personality who offers a connection to a secondary world of wonder, which will shine through momentarily if circumstances are arranged correctly here in the world which we experience. Let us make this trick have real meaning for the spectator, and let us give them a little cathartic journey with it that will not revolve around the mundane question of 'How did he do that?'

I remember seeing Terry Lunceford float a ring on a video, and it seemed a much more charming idea than borrowing something as impersonal as a banknote. So my first thought was to use a ring, but the issue remained of how to invoke a real emotional response and to make my role warmer and more human than the implausible nerd-god that many magicians portray. Here is my routine - meaning and magic inspired by Mr. Lunceford's video:

I sit next to a lady, having obtained her trust and intrigue with preceding effects and my general demeanour. I might take her hand, and ask her if any of her rings have particular and pleasant memories attached to them. After she has pointed one out, I tell her, unless it is obviously a wedding ring, to remain quiet about the memory in question, as it is none of my business what it might be. Then I ask her if I might borrow it for a minute or so.

As I take the ring, I load it onto the thread that is anchored to my wallet (or some such personal item *that would be rude for anyone else to touch*) on the table. For loading details, see the video mentioned: I want to describe the presentation here, not dwell on matters of

handling. Suffice it to say that the ring can be plucked from the air at the end of the routine without needing to break the thread. As the loaded ring is placed on the palm of my right hand, I take her hand in my left and say, "I'd like you to think back for me to that memory – that pleasant memory. And to help you get back into the feeling for me, I want you to take whatever you saw at the time as you see it now, and expand the picture... brighten it, enrich the colour... that's right, and add some s p a r k l e ...that's excellent, so that you can really feel that good feeling inside of you now like a white light." As I say this, I ensure that she really does get back into the feeling, which she will. Everything about my verbal and non-verbal communication is telling her to take this seriously. Because it is a little weird, suspense and interest builds up in the group.

I continue. "See that white light inside you like a swirling vortex of good feeling. Really get into this. Now, keep your eyes on the ring. As you focus, see that light swirling in your mind's eye. Now make that light move slowly inside you, start to grow and spread. Keep looking at the ring. Make the light move. Make it" - suddenly the ring twitches – "move." That twitch is small but clear, and the group will come in closer.

"No, don't be distracted. Keep your eye on the ring but see the light shifting too. Make the feeling spread and move, that's right – don't be distracted by the ring, keep your mind on the feeling – spreading, moving..." As I describe this, I let the ring twitch a little more, then start to slide around a little on my hand in a very eerie way. Of course, if she has really involved herself in the proceedings, the movement of the ring will start to control her experience of the feeling, and as it moves more freely, so she will experience the spreading of the feeling accordingly. I am still only allowing the ring to move in a small area of my hand, so that when the moment is

most tense, I can say: "You see, I want you to understand what people mean when they talk about their heart soaring, or their spirits lifting..." and suddenly, beautifully, elegantly, the ring floats right up in the air above my hand. It hovers as I say, "And I want you to know that you can *completely* circle and surround that feeling [*I circle the ring with my fingers in a deceptive move given on the tape*] with the knowledge that you can just pluck it out of the air any time you need it [*I remove it from the air*] and keep hold of it for the rest of your life [*and hand it back*]."

The reaction to this effect is ten times more powerful than that with which the 'Floating Bill' met. There is genuine tension at the start, audible gasps at the first tiny movements, and then the most beautiful, silent swell of emotion as the ring suddenly lifts. When I circle the ring with my fingers, a few people start applauding, or making their enthusiasm known, while others look dumbstruck. Handing it back with the warm message of being able to recreate this good feeling nearly always results in the lady clasping my hand tightly and saying 'Thank You.' That is the most rewarding reaction I could ever hope for from magic. A heartfelt word of gratitude: an acknowledgement that she had been transported by wonder. Once after performing this, a chap said privately to me that it was 'the most lovely thing he had ever seen.' On other occasions, ridiculous as it may sound in print, the routine has evoked tears from the participant – happy ones, I might add. (On one occasion where the lady did not have a ring and the performance was privately in my own home, I had her secretly write down a word on a slip of paper, which would evoke a happy memory for her. The slip was placed in my hand, and the routine was combined with what became an accurate description from me of the entire memory, and when the paper lifted at the end the poor thing burst into floods of joyous tears. Perhaps a little inappropriate for table-hopping, but evidence

of how much more impactful magic can be made when sensitively handled.)

The question of how the ring floated is neither here nor there. There is a warmth and a beauty to the effect, I hope, that means more than that banal question of method. The emotional response is greater than the intellectual one, which means that when they think back to the trick, their minds will be seduced by the warm message of the effect and that emotional reaction, and it will be an enormous effort to consider it coldly in terms of handling.

Now, let us look at this in terms of its dramatic resonance, for that is the key to its success. Firstly, I could take the ring and have it rise at *my* command. Then I would become the implausible impostor again. So my first task is to shift my role. In this effect, I am not playing the omniscient character of the Bill Floater, but rather someone who will take her literally by the hand and show her how to connect with a magical realm separate from both of us. That is the major shift that makes this routine so effective. I am not saying 'Look at me – I can do this!,' and therefore not inviting any cynicism.

Secondly, I create conflict and tension. I do this by insisting that she not be distracted by the ring: and by giving her various images and ideas to juggle. This will involve effort on her part, and vicariously from the rest of the group. She is investing emotional effort, and trying to sustain a precarious balance. When that balance is held, something magical glimmers through. My task as the magician is to help her maintain that, so that the moment occurs. The tension is controlled, and as it moves to a crescendo, the attention of the group has been focussed into a tiny space, and they have become physiologically geared to perceive and expect very small movements. Thus, at the peak moment, the ring rises and blows

away their rapid intellectualising and leaves them with an entirely non-cerebral event.

Thirdly, there is cause and effect here, unlike in the classic magic paradigm of mere effect. But the cause is of a magical nature: it is not spelt out. Part of the delight of this effect for the audience is experiencing the movement of the ring as a metaphor, and understanding that. As they make the connection between the movement of the feeling in the body of the spectator and the movement of the ring, *without having it explained*, there is a resonance felt. This is quite the opposite of the normal technique of patronising the spectators with dreamt-up, crowbarred-in explanations of why the red and black cards are separating or the knot on the rope is able to slide around. So here I do not talk about psychokinesis, or energy travelling along her arm and through mine. I just let the effect speak for itself, and allow the spectators to find the magical and emotional cause for themselves.

I have loosely structured this book around the model of magic I have in mind. We have begun with setting out our aims, in the same way the magician or hero sets out with a certain goal in mind. In the second part we will look at areas of conflict and practicalities that he must deal with in order to achieve that goal, and we will finish in the third by drawing conclusions and ending that journey – hopefully, like our hero, with a new level of understanding and perception.

From Peter Brook's *The Empty Space:*

> "When a performance is over, what remains? Fun can be forgotten, but powerful emotion also disappears and good

> arguments lose their thread. When emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself – then something in the mind burns. The event scorches onto the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell – a picture. It is the play's central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are highly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say. When years later I think of a striking theatrical experience I find a kernel engraved in my memory: two tramps under a tree, an old woman dragging a cart, a sergeant dancing, three people on a sofa in hell – or occasionally a trace deeper than any imagery. I haven't a hope of remembering the meanings precisely, but from the kernel I can reconstruct a set of meanings. Then a purpose will have been served. A few hours could amend my thinking for life. This is almost but not quite impossible to achieve."

Let us turn to how we might, in our small way, achieve it.

Meaning and Vision

What is the magical experience?

> "Astonishment is not an emotion that's created. It's an existing state that's revealed."
>
> "The experience of astonishment is the experience of a clear, primal state of mind that they associate with a child's state of mind."
>
> "At that moment of trying to box the unboxable your world-view breaks up. The boxes are gone. And what's left? Simply what was always there. Your natural state of mind. That's the moment of astonishment."

Those lines are taken from Paul Harris' introduction to his *The Art of Astonishment*, and give a clear and very interesting model of understanding what the experience of magic might be. However, this idea that astonishment is also our primal state of mind seems a little too convenient for us as magicians. It is dangerously flattering to ourselves to believe that we are putting people in touch with something primal and perfect through the very act of performing magic. The problem is the temptation to theorize and unify a practice that is in its nature entirely pragmatic and opportunistic. One should certainly have a clear sense of what one

wishes to achieve with one's magic, but at the same time when one is dealing with a craft, and occasionally an art, that is in itself a beautiful demonstration of how misleading our models of the world can be, one must be wary of objectifying that vision and mistaking it for reality.

As far as any statements can be made, I think that the situation is as follows. The experience of magic is not a universal; it is a direct result of the communications given by the individual performer. These communications may be intentional or otherwise. For example, if an irritating magician insists on performing for a spectator and the latter remains annoyed, then that spectator's experience of magic will be *annoyance*. Not a wonderful link to a primal, child-like state of mind. The experience of magic may be no more than the possibly quite mundane response of an individual spectator at any one time, for the magic does not happen anywhere other than in her perceptions at a particular moment. To insist that magic is somehow *important* and inherently cathartic when one is not making it so is nonsense. Magic is not inherently anything. It is what you sell it as.

Failure to understand this can lead only to misguided pretension on the one hand as well as trivialising our art on the other. Any magician who says what magic 'does' in a grand way is expressing his vision, which he hopefully communicates in his performance. His words have the same weight as those of the performer that insists that it is a vehicle for 'having a bit of fun' and no more. Each is expressing his vision, and each, if he performs true to his vision, will make it true. Neither is correct, and both are. This is due to the unique nature of magic, in that it *only* happens in the minds of a spectator. If that spectator does not perceive the magic, it does not happen. Even if you are playing the part of that spectator, when you

practise alone, that role has been filled. Accepting this, it is dangerous to insist that magic has any *inherent* qualities.

In understanding this, the issue then becomes one of creating an experience for the audience. Imagine for just a second that you were to put this book down in order to pour yourself a steaming cup of Earl Grey or chat to one of your delightful friends, only to find this handsome volume gone when you turned back to retrieve it. You experience would be one of bewilderment, rapidly followed by backtracking through your remembered experience to find out what you must have done to misplace the book. You would be doubtless very confused, and would start hunting for it around the place where you sat. You would move position to gain a more comprehensive perspective on a confounding situation.

This experience is not particularly child-like, neither is it magical. It *is* one of bewilderment, and of rapid rationalising to find possible lacunae in your understanding. You are eager to grasp a solution, and to relieve your mind by assigning meaning to the experience.

If magic were to be performed without any meaning attached to it, I imagine the end result would be something similar. However, the moment a spectator realises his role as witness/audience to a performance by a magician, much meaning has already been ascribed to the situation. The spectator knows that he is not to take it too seriously, and that he is being fooled for the purposes of his entertainment. The common experiences we have of things seemingly disappearing and similar confusions are probably close to what magic would feel like if we were offered no clues, context or meaning. In such a situation, we see that we would run through a rapid internal reality check that would continue until a solution was

offered or we simply gave up worrying and dismissed the confusion with a laugh.

The difference between this sort of bewilderment and the experience of 'astonishment' that magic should produce in one way or another, is the fact that in the latter case, the bewilderment is given a set of references and a context in which it operates, so that the spectator is given the option of finding the bewilderment satisfying, and seeing value in it. The more resonant the magic, the more satisfying it will be, unless the intention of the magician is purposefully to dissatisfy for deeper aesthetic reasons. Thus magic has no pure form: in a pure form it is merely confusion, not magic at all. It becomes magic when the performer gives it shape in the mind of his audience. He may believe it to be about achieving a child-like state of wonder or some such notion, but this is just his choice of shape, and if he does not deliver the goods in performance, then he is deluding himself.

Magic, therefore, is only *inherently* about how the performer decides to frame it. This is a behavioural issue regarding the performer, not an identity issue regarding the material.

How you decide to frame your magic, whether or not you find yourself responding to the frame I give it, will be irrelevant – for all the same reasons – unless you can effectively communicate that framing to your audience. If you don't communicate it, it doesn't exist, *and you're not doing what you think you're doing.*

Ascribing Meaning in the Place of Confusion: Determining the Vision.

The first task of the effective performer is to decide upon what meaning his magic *should* have. And then, to be true to this vision, he should delude himself into believing that vision to be absolutely true. If that vision is one of magic as a light-hearted blend of comedy and puzzling tricks, then so be it. If it is one of a dark and disturbing art-form, then so be that too.

There can be no short-cut to achieving an artistic vision of any sort, unless one borrows from another artist. This, of course, does not achieve the goal of arriving at a vision that will define the artist, although it may allow him to adopt a style, and feel second-best. From my own experience, the growing magician starts off pretty much without any discernible style, delighting in packet tricks and bad clothing. If he comes to adopt a style, it is of a generic, fast-talking, vaguely humiliating and bouncy magic-man. The magician, when asked to perform a trick, will shift from being a perfectly pleasant, sweet young man into Mr. Light Entertainment, developing suddenly exaggerated body-movements and, in England at least, traces of a regional accent that is not his own. He will say words that are obviously 'lines,' people will recognise his 'patter' as being such, and any connection to the person they knew and liked only moments before will be severed the moment the card box is opened. Any experience of *real* magic is lost before the game starts.

Then, through a series of events that radically alter his approach to performance, as well as through time and consideration, that magician will hopefully come to settle into his performance. Instead of communicating tension and weirdness, he will resonate complete congruity with his performing persona. The material he performs will reflect that persona, and the congruity will expand further. As

that happens, the audience will sense real professionalism, and also feel utterly confident in his hands.

I am describing an ideal path for the growing performer, but we are all aware of the almost tangible difference between a comfortable professional performance and an uncomfortable amateurish one. The former will control a room, the latter will suck all energy from it like an extractor fan.

The hobbyist performing for his local club is not expected to fill the clubhouse with a well-honed presence. But any magician working professionally *who should know better* has no business insulting an audience, especially one trying to eat, with sub-standard performance. Few things annoy me more than paying to watch bad, self-indulgent performance, let alone having it thrust upon me while I am enjoying a meal with my few remaining friends.

Clearly we all have to start somewhere, which is why I emphasise that I am criticising those performers *who should know better*. We watch a first-time stand-up comedian die at the open mike and cringe in embarrassment and hope that he will go away and change his material, but we don't resent him for it (as long as he refrains from blaming the audience for not being responsive). But when a more established comedian who is working the circuit stands before us and is blatantly unfunny from beginning to end, we have reason to feel insulted. If a reasonably seasoned performer cannot see that his audiences are not responding, then he must re-think his material, not force it on further audiences. A performer may be so enamoured with himself that he is blind to audience apathy or irritation, but that is not a pleasant thing to watch.

Jesus, let it go. Take a chill pill.

The magician who does control a room and richly satisfy his audience will have a vision of what he feels his magic to be. That vision will have arisen out of years of defining his performance and the development of a style. The vision will propel the magic and give it meaning, while the style is the natural expression of that vision. If the magician comes to feel that magic is about the creation of a particular feeling, then everything in his being will point towards and encourage that feeling. And the 'vision' will be just that: the magician will have in his mind a clear image of idealised magic performance, and will strive to achieve that. He will know when he has failed and sold himself short, and the humiliation stings for a long time. But he will also know when he has touched that ideal, and created exactly what he feels magic should be.

My own vision – and the one with which this book deals – is one of magic that feels real, and ultimately serious (though not necessarily solemn). In close-up quarters it suggests a magic which is charming and gentle in tone, but devastating in content. On stage or television I can afford to be more openly disturbing, but when I am invited into the space of a few spectators, I must respect that. It is a vision of magic that enthrals and emotionally touches rather than just entertains, although it also encompasses a variety of light-hearted amusements too, for I *am* paid to entertain. It is also very much based around character/ego issues: it is not a social vision, or one that contains a message that pertains to anything other than the performance. The *message* of the performance is the performance itself. It is about a commingling of character and material that is deeply affecting, and which will transport the spectators for a while to a magical plane, through deft emotional involvement. I don't mind if they know it's all illusion, but I would like them to feel that that is not the point. And finally, I would like them to attach all those feelings back to me as a performer, so that I create a certain level of

intrigue about myself in their eyes – and to walk away from the performance looking at the world with a wider perspective.

In my mind these things form a picture – a literal vision – and I can do everything to ensure that the reality of the situation gets as close to that picture as possible. Few will share my vision exactly as I see it, but I absolutely have to believe that it is *the* way of performing magic while making sure that it does indeed provide the response I expect it to. It is pointless presuming that the floating ring effect that I have described is better just because it conforms to my principles: it must then get the response I wish it to, otherwise I am deluding myself. The important point is not so much the individual aspirations of the performer, but whether they make for better magic, and whether he can congruently perform in a way that attains them.

As for how one arrives at such an imaginary picture of how magic performance should be, the process will begin, usually, negatively. One normally decides first what one does *not* wish to do. I realised early on that I would not feel comfortable performing rope magic, neither would I be entirely happy with coins, and never would I be a home to Mr. and Mrs. Sponge Ball. The first task is to question what the reasons for one's preferences may then be: if not this material or these props, then what? And why? And as one begins to form a sense of one's preferred material, a feeling for what one would most like to achieve in performance starts to form.

Another question here would be – *what exactly do I want my audience to feel has occurred, and what do I want them to think of me?* For magicians who do not keep this question in mind as they design and perform material, no clear answers will develop. The magician will just do the trick as best as he can, and then move to another one. If

pressed, he will say that the audience should feel amazed and amused by his skill.

This brings us back to the analogy of the violin cadenza in the symphony. Appreciation of skill can enhance the magic, if it happens within a certain context. Or returning to our hero metaphor, we need to appreciate as an audience that the hero is equipped with certain skills that make him intriguing in some way. If the audience understands that we have the deftness of response, enviable physical dexterity and ability psychologically to manipulate that they enjoy being part of, then our character is defined as someone worth watching and rooting for. If we then take the audience to a point of crisis, where in order to make the shimmering point of magic occur we must invest effort into resolving a conflict, then their understanding of our intriguing skills will only enhance the drama. The opposite view of this is to say that such things as card flourishes have no place in magic, for displays of skill are not compatible with magic being real and independent of the performer's technique. But this is a flawed argument. To pretend that we are not utilising skill is daft and patronising, and to display it to just the right degree to define our characters (or in another way, to gain credibility early on), makes for more resonant relations with the audience.

The magician who does ask himself the question of exactly what response does he wish his performance to elicit from the group – and continues to refine his answers – will perform in a way that is borne from an appreciation of the spectators' experience of an art-form. In that he realises that magic is all about the experience of the spectator and is as far removed from technique and sleight-of-hand as music is from fingering notation on a score, he will be set in the direction of efficiently creating powerful magic, if he has the skills and sensitivities of a composer of magic to back up his intent.

In forming the vision, it is also vital to ensure that it develops from the right perspective. As you think about your performance, and allow that vision to form, it is important to note that the mental image is *of you performing for a group* in whatever surroundings. If when you think of performance, you see what you would see out of your own eyes, then you are seeing what you do from the wrong perspective. You must be sure that you *view yourself* when you think about what you do. Partly from the perspective of the audience, and *also from the perspective of an imaginary third party*, so that you can see the interaction and dynamic between you and the spectators clearly. If you are not used to this, then it will take you by surprise. Seeing everything about yourself - your looks, your dress, your manner and body–language, the effects you perform – all from the perspective of *how they actually come across rather than how they feel to you* is vital as a performer. A performer who cannot view or criticise himself from these external perspectives probably has no business performing professionally.

As I have said, I don't believe that there are any shortcuts for arriving at a vision of how your magic must be. Indeed, it would make no sense for there to be one, for the vision will change as you grow, expanding and developing your ideas. But I think it to be the case that having *some* idea of what you believe magic to be about is important at any stage. This book is about what I have currently decided magic means to me, which I must treat as if it were absolutely what magic *is*. But along the way I must remind you that these things are merely my opinion and far from fact – for, as we have discussed, magic is not inherently *anything*. So if you do not agree with my vision, I hope that means that you have formed one for yourself.

Part Two:

Conflict and Practicalities

Withholding the Power

> "I want you to remember this fundamental theatrical rule: establish truly and precisely details that are typical and the audience will have a sense of the whole, because of their special ability to imagine and complete in imagination what you have suggested."
>
> Stanislavski

Suggestion and Presence

I remember fondly as a child – though why we called him 'Fondly' I now forget – finding the Wicked Witch of the West absolutely terrifying. Today, of course, a massive gay icon, she would lurch around with her green face and insane laugh in a manner that had me clutching my tiny boy-genitals with foreboding.

Nowadays I don't find her particularly scary. As an adult, other things frighten me. Spiders the size of my bathroom squatting in the sink, my own mother's sexual advances – these things cause upset and trepidation to me as a nearly-thirty-year-old. As adults, we develop a sensitivity to finesse and subtlety, and find the implication of horror in a plausible and everyday mould far more terrifying than a woman with a pointy hat and a yeast infection. We respond more to Hopkins' deft portrayal of the mesmerising psychopathic cannibal Hannibal Lecter. The more he withholds the promise of danger beneath a charming veneer, the more we feel it. Compare Hannibal Lecter with Christopher Walken's hysterical portrayal of the

Headless Horseman in 'Sleepy Hollow,' and you will agree thoroughly with me that there is much to be gleaned from a sense of power comfortably and securely held back, and only hinted at through the expressions of character that may come with a subtle gesture or use of the eyes.

It takes confidence and a true sense of performance character to keep the sense of magic and intrigue at a level where the audience feel it and respond to it, *but feel that they have sensed it for themselves* rather than having had it thrust upon them. The mentalist who presents a two-dimensional, exaggerated character, portrays something most probably quite unbelievable, and ultimately dishonest. He makes a similar mistake to the magician who decides to wear one of those terrifying badges of amateurship when performing: namely a playing-card tie. I realise that I have just alienated a third of the magic community by mentioning that, but trust me on this one, *you look dreadful.*

We all know that if you false transfer a coin into your left hand, it is generally bad magical technique to point and say, "I have the coin in my left hand now." Overstating the obvious will make an audience question it. Furthermore, a person hearing *any* statement will have to do some interpretive work on it to make sense of it and fit into his version of the world. If you want a person to believe something, and you state that thing outright as a plain fact, they will, most of the time, do their little piece of interpretative work on that statement and in doing so, move away from it slightly. The more independent minded a person is, the more questioning they will perform.

Add to this the fact that you are going to, as a magician, invite a certain amount of cynicism from your audience before you get started, and you will see that most things that you state outright will

not be taken on face value. On the other hand, your audience will hopefully be paying very close attention to you, which will make them very responsive to any tiny cue that you give them. *The little things will be responded to: the bold statements will be cynically questioned.*

If your audience is going to be doing even more interpretative work than normal, which they will as witnesses of illusion in order to feel that they are keeping their wits about them, then you have to understand the dynamic of guiding their interpretations even more than normal. If you make a bold statement, they will interpret *away* from the content of that statement. There is no other direction in which to go. However, if you *imply* what you want them to believe in a way that seems unintentional, then they will interpret in the direction that you wish – i.e. *towards* the desired conclusion.

Apparently unintentional implication is an application of suggestion. Understanding the role of suggestion need not be daunting, nor does one need to get into such exaggerated nonsenses as NLP to use it. Kenton Knepper, in his gathering of electro-magnetic sound registration cartridges "Wonder Words," has applied Bandler and Grinder's 'Transformational Grammar' and other linguistic patterns, (which in turn go back to much of Chomsky) to magical presentation. NLP has always claimed to be 'elusively obvious,' in that it formulates and arranges ideas and phenomena that are already present and clear to anybody who cares to look. If you do not have a knack for persuasive or communicative skill, then learning NLP techniques may improve your abilities. More likely though, they will allow you to sound like someone with no real social skills who has learnt a set of 'rapport' techniques that, ironically, alienate and irritate people around you. If you already have a knack for communicative subtlety, then the 'elusive' part of

that claim is rendered redundant: the 'art of people-handling' becomes, in Stephen Fry's memorable words, *'the art of the-so-fucking-obvious-it-makes-your-nose-bleed.'* Speaking as someone who has practised, trained, studied and worked with NLP for some time, it seems to me to be a mixture of part common sense (which are the parts that no one can seriously call peculiar to NLP), part reasonably effective techniques for turning the mind from such low-level pathologies as phobias and so on, and the rest over-hyped and evangelically-packaged seductive rubbish. But as long as many of its practitioners claim that anyone can become a genius in a matter of minutes, it's not going to go away.

My main concern is with creating presence and meaning through subtlety and implication, rather than localised language tricks that may or may not enhance the spectator's perception of an effect. If an unappealing magician with no presence presents effects trivially but with all of Mr. Knepper's techniques brilliantly at hand, I don't feel that he will succeed magically as much as a performer with immense charisma equipped with just a natural knowledge of word-power.

The most natural way of achieving the right kind of communication for the enhancement of presence and meaning is to simply *believe* in the magic as you perform it, with an understanding of how you are apparently achieving your miracles, and then to let that understanding leak through naturally. I have written before in *Pure Effect* about the importance in mentalist effects of communicating an apparent (though fictitious) method for the achievement of the mind-reading. The more you can communicate those fictitious techniques without appearing to do so purposefully, the more believable they will be, for the audience will feel that it has spotted them for itself.

With all magic, this is a sound principle. I shall quote a charming passage of Tommy Wonder, in which he describes the Silent Script in application:

> 'If I pretend to place a ball into my left hand, but really palm it in the right, I would hold the left fingers slightly cupped, just as I would if I genuinely held the ball. If the ball were in my left hand, I would be able to see it. But since it isn't there, I can't really see the ball. However, I can force my imagination to see the ball. It is part of my silent script. I see the image of the ball being held in my left hand. Then I think the words, "Now vanish, my boy," addressing the ball in my left hand. As the ball obeys, I might see it first lose its color, becoming transparent until it eventually disappears. But whatever the imaginary mode of vanish I have fixed on, I actually see it go in just that way. When it's gone, I might think something like "Good!" while I open the hand. I can open the hand now because the ball is no longer there and the hand needn't hold it. Of course the moves have been practiced so that in opening the hand the audience has a chance to see that it is empty. Then, as I brush my palms together I could think, "Got rid of that one nicely."'
>
> From *Acting is Not Making Faces*, The Books of Wonder Vol. I, p. 295

We have discussed a model of magic where the magician is not quite the omniscient figure who can control the universe whimsically though the click of his fingers. Instead, he is a more human guide to a realm of wonder that will shine through, a little unpredictably, if circumstances in this world are arranged just right. Although there will be times when a more traditional, whimsical approach will be

called for, the magician committed to this more dramatically resonant model must believe it entirely in performance and allow that belief to lead his behaviour. For example, in the Floating Ring effect I have described, I must not be embarrassed about the fact that the spectator is genuinely and seriously to create the feeling in her mind, nor must I downplay to her the importance of her serious cooperation. It is by not compromising the magical cause and effect of the piece that it has the potential to become wondrous.

By imaginatively following the vanish of the ball with so much commitment, Tommy Wonder makes it more real and therefore more wondrous – in a way that the audience will feel for themselves rather than have pointed out to them. Similarly, if one commits to a dramatically profound model of magic in this way, the audience will be led to a greater involvement in the effects.

The times when I am disappointed in my own performance are the times when I have not been committed to my beliefs, and therefore performed arbitrarily. When I begin to perform to a group, there are certain beliefs I have in mind, and I will allow them to be communicated subtly:

- This demands your undivided attention.
- You will treat my performance with respect.
- This is the real stuff. I'm not messing about.
- I am going to freak you out.

I will communicate the first belief by taking my time before I start (to build up interest), then waiting until I have the attention of the group. If a couple of people are still talking, I will wait for them to stop. In situations where they keep chatting, invariably other people at the table become irritated with them and make them be quiet. Then I will thank the group politely. If I see a mobile telephone (or 'cell phone' to our American brethren), I will usually ask for it to be switched off, along with any others. This does depend upon the nature of the venue: but if the group are in my performance space, rather than vice-versa, I would certainly make that request.

The second belief is communicated much with the first, but much can still be said by the amount of polite respect with which I treat the spectators around me. If someone is trying to mess things up for me, I will soon move them to 'let someone else have a go' – and my clear but courteous refusal to tolerate disrespect will be understood by the group.

The final two beliefs can be stated more obviously, as long as you are sure that you have the charisma and talent to back up your claims. I like to use the initial moment of introduction to sow the seeds in the right direction. Because the approach is such an important moment, and one bungled by so many performers, I shall spend a moment looking at what one can subtly communicate.

At my residency in Bristol[1], in the sprawling East-European lounge bar of a restaurant called *Byzantium*, I approach a group with something like the following words, and a well-practised glint in my eye:

'Good evening, welcome to Byzantium. If you don't know me, my name's Derren Brown, and I'm... a *kind* of magician. Hello there (shaking hands, getting a few names)... May I join you for a couple of minutes?... Thank you.'

I'm shaking hands and learning a few names, repeating my own of course, knowing full well that the words 'a kind of magician' are hanging in the air. The timing is such that they are all left questioning that description, but have no chance to verbalise their curiosity. I don't want to have to explain what I mean, and I want to get them into a responsive and curious state. Any cynicism that may have resulted from introducing myself as merely 'the magician' is disarmed by the implication that their preconceptions are going to be inaccurate. Also, by welcoming them to the restaurant, it is clear that I am part of the place and not someone in from the street. And by taking the time to learn some names and asking if I might join

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[1] Note 2nd Ed. *Sadly no more. They can't afford me. I've resisted the urge to place this section in the past tense, but it seemed unnecessary: as is clear, when this book was written I was earning my living table-hopping. There is no greater form of instruction than these regular 'gigs,' where one develops material at an astonishing rate and has the time and space to hone everything to a fine point. If you are beginning a career as a magician, go and get yourself such a residency – aside from their instructional value, you'll get 99% of your work through them once you settle in the right sort of place.*

them (and no one's going to refuse after all the hand-shaking and so polite a request), I have communicated a respectful tone, which will be reflected in their attitude towards me.

Much, therefore, has already been said in a few moments, and in a way that will have the spectators feeling what I would like them to, and apparently of their own accord. This can only come from practising extreme self-awareness – literally seeing yourself, in your mind, approaching a group and introducing yourself. While it may seem that I am making a lot out of a very small point, one only has to see how most magicians alienate their audiences from the opening moments to see how vital it is to get this right.

Now, don't get me wrong, please don't. If you find yourself getting me wrong for even a moment, stop immediately. I am not suggesting that the approach to a table need be an enormous issue. The words I say are perfectly natural, and I do not stick to them rigidly. People that are naturally affable may never give this a moment's consideration, but feel so delighted and confident about approaching a group that they communicate all the right things with no need for thought. When performers do make a big deal out of the approach, they generally try to be too clever, and work out an opening effect that has happened before anyone has a chance to realise what is happening. David Williamson, on an early lecture video, describes a spoon-bending routine, with which he then opened at tables. He would ask to borrow a spoon, perform his excellent sequence, and then introduce himself afterwards. Perhaps this comes down to no more than cultural differences, but to approach the table of a Dining English Family in this way would seem a little rude. However good an opening sequence one may have devised, I cannot overestimate the importance of invoking curiosity and responsiveness in the group before you officially begin.

My first few routines are, currently, of the mind-reading variety. The description of myself as 'a kind of magician' now starts to make sense: clearly I am not someone who is going to do clever tricks with coins and bits of rope. My style is gentle and serious at heart, with some strong points of humour to keep the tension well-paced.

In my mind, I have the attitude that I am performing the 'real' stuff, and merely give the description of 'kind of magician' to help them apply a label. Because I am not touting myself as a serious psychic, I am happy for them to think of me as an *elevated* magician of sorts. At the beginning of one routine, I say the words, "As a few of us get deeper into magic and move away from the sleight-of-hand end of things..." This subtly trivialises mere trickery, which in turn suggests that I am doing something altogether more real. And rare, for only a 'few of us' go so deep.

When I am concentrating on mind-reading effects, I close with the Floating Ring. By this point, however, the mood has been so created that to think of physical trickery would seem insulting. Having established that I work with deeper forces than mere prestidigitation, a couple of strong, visual magical effects – presented with a serious tone – become that much more powerful. To sustain this I must not, in this set, perform anything that is clearly the result of clever fingers. Therefore the preceding mind-reading effects lay a core of suggestion as to my methods and talents, which colours the presentation of my non-mental routines.

Therefore, routining itself can communicate much of your vision and the perception of magic with which you wish to leave them. The misguided point is made often by magicians, mainly non-professionals, that if an audience perceive you first as a sleight-of-hand magician, it will make it difficult for them to believe in you

later as a mind-reader. Magicians make such statements while a large proportion of the general public, at the time of writing, are happy to believe that David Blaine has some occult abilities even though his repertoire is based on card-tricks. David Berglas also exquisitely blended the two performance areas – in the end it is all down to the performer. Either he makes it fit and is able to hold it all together by the force of his personality, or he fails because his performance is meandering and unclear. It is ludicrous to make objective statements about whether magic and mind-reading mix. In fact, one might even consider the converse of the misguided maxim and suggest that *if your audience perceives you first as a mind-reader, it will be more difficult for them later to believe you as a sleight-of-hand magician.* Given a wise choice of material, and the right sort of presentation, the resonant effect of good mental routines will lay a suggestive base that can turn a magic trick into a miracle. The two areas of magic can absolutely be mixed and lie congruently with each other, provided one is intelligent enough to *routine and perform* them sensitively.

Remember, my model here is not one of pretending to be psychic. It is one of presenting magic that does not feel like trickery, and which captures the emotions and imagination (while distracting the intellect) in a way that makes it feel real. So I am not trying to convince the audience that because I can read their minds, I must have super-human powers that allow me *actually* to make an object vanish. I don't expect it to be intellectually credible in the way that the mind-reading sells itself to be. But by setting the stage with some ethereal effects that are clearly far removed from trickery or sleight-of-hand, a tone is set of non-physical techniques and psychological manipulation. Once this is established, I can finally push it just beyond those bounds, to further disarm the group. When the watch stops and the ring twitches, the 'ethereal' has just manifested itself

visibly. When the ring then floats, it is designed to sentimentally overwhelm the rapidly adjusting intellects of the group. Rather than undermining the mind-reading, I aim here to elevate it to something more aesthetically charming, something that has its raison d'être in the world of wonder rather than puzzlement: fundamentally emotional rather than intellectual. Something that is essentially a magical effect can achieve this, lifting the act to a new level, provided it is in keeping with the premise of what has come before. (Therefore a four-ace production to finish would not work, whereas something visual and bizarre and beautiful like a penetration effect or levitation could imply that the group is hallucinating, something in line entirely with what has come before.) A magical effect becomes more serious and eerie, while the mind-reading becomes more wondrous.

To summarise so far: we must seek to absorb the model of real magic at the level of *belief*, then allow it to leak through in the way in which we *approach* our audience and the thought behind the *structure of our routines*. Our words and actions must presuppose that we are performing the real stuff, and in order to be doing so, greater demands will have to be made on everyone's investment. The spectators have a greater role to play than if we were just going to manipulate a few cards for them.

That presupposition is a very powerful form of suggestion. The audience will take their cues from what we presume to be true, and work towards the conclusions that we would like them to have.

Suggestion and Character

At another level, there are various techniques for communicating through suggestion the kind of presence and character that will enhance the feeling of magic being real. This is an immensely personal area, and I do not wish anyone to try to clone my performing character. However, I would mention one particularly powerful tool, which is the use of silence. This can be used to unnerve an audience (I begin my stage and platform set by just silently looking over the audience) or to convey the difficulty and intensity of one's technique (through extended moments of obvious concentration on your part) – either way, it can create immense tension very plausibly. Again, this is because it *implies* meaning, tension or presence, without you having to verbalise it. It can make you very frightening to an audience by invoking massive self-consciousness on their part, to a degree that could not be reached by *actively* trying to frighten them. And the fear that results is the right kind: the chill that comes from unnerving theatre. Above all, it communicates very powerfully a confidence on the part of the performer and allows him to hold a room on tenterhooks through presence alone. Of course, it also *takes* immense confidence on the part of that performer, and a complete committal on his part to the model of real magic. In any other situation, where the magician does not aim for any resonance, the magic will be communicated at a shallow level: therefore, the silence will be perceived as shallow and be rendered as unnecessarily slow and boring. If, however, you are making the audience work imaginatively, then they will do the same with your silence and find it very effective. If silence is used at the start of a performance, then it catches the audience at a moment when they will already be at their most imaginative and responsive, and will go very far to establishing your character as quietly intimidating and powerful. This may not be your aim, but to an

extent I wish it to be part of my character when performing for large groups, before deflating in it such a way that re-establishes rapport but leaves a background intensity lingering. For the creation of the experience of real magic, other than where the performer is creating the character of the idiot savant or bumbling, unwilling vessel for otherworldly forces, establishing a character with the potential to unnerve seems immensely valuable.

By paying close attention to how subtleties can be communicated and implied, you will go a long way to forming an engrossing character. The fascinating magical qualities that you apparently possess will be communicated as subtly as any character trait which is absolutely a part of you, without need for overstatement. Therefore there will be a richness and a three-dimensional quality to you as a performer, rather than just being a worker of tricks.

The simplest way of thinking about this in practical terms is as follows. When you are performing magic at an event, make it such that people are getting to meet *you*. They are going to interact with a very fascinating and gently unnerving you who clearly has some very marvellous abilities. Your whole manner, your looks, the way you speak: all these things communicate those abilities and that character. You will of course offer one or two demonstrations of those skills, demonstrations which will have an air of unpredictability to them, and the feeling of being mere glimpses into a wealth of esoteric knowledge that would make you fascinating to talk to. You bear the weight and the joy of your profession and passion in your very being: there is a calmness and a magnetism to you that anyone remotely sensitive will pick up on. These are attractive and immensely engaging qualities. There is nothing of the sequinned entertainer about you, no alienating 'personality' slapped

on like stage make-up. You resonate real magic, and do not just look like an act.

Later we will look at forming character. But for now, presuming that you are a capable magician, the presence that you exude is your most important asset. Where your personality radiates the quality of magic, an enormous amount of suggestion will be at work. In that situation, you can perform what could otherwise be seen as a mediocre trick and have it play as profoundly magical.

The Devil's Picture-book

The Role of Playing Cards, and Choice of Material

I have a dear, delightful Grandmother whom I see occasionally in the warden-assisted flat where she ekes out her twilight years. The transient, crepuscular period between saucy middle-age and violent, painful death has, in the case of this heavy octogenarian, been a time of variable madness. One minute she is a sweet old silly, knitting herself a set of syringe covers and talking about her favourite flowers, and the very next moment she has just told you *and* your friends that she has a ring supporting the back wall of her vagina.

The prolapse of a madwoman pushed neatly to one side for a moment, her candid, off-the-cuff confessions got me thinking about the issue of propriety. When I ask her about her day and receive the reply, "Well I got up this morning and I needed to post a letter so I went out to the post box at the end of the street and then I thought I'd need some stamps so I went in and got some then I came home and had a shit and then I went out and bought a lettuce," I am delighted by her happy ignorance of what is or is not appropriate to the situation at hand. In the wizened filigree of her old, old mind, such things are all part of her daily tumble of thoughts and experiences, and there is no reason to hold back, even if she quite turns her relatives from their tea.

What may feel a natural expression to one person may be odd and inappropriate to the receiver. In magic, you may perform material with which you are entirely comfortable, and believe you do so with the right kind of professional charm, yet that material may be utterly inappropriate – either to your character or the mores of the venue.

In *Pure Effect*, I mention briefly my handling of 'Ring Flight,' or 'The Flying Ring,' where the ring climactically appears in my sock. After a couple of vanishes and returns to the key-fob, its arrival in my ankle-hair is a surprising one indeed. I would gingerly lift my trouser-leg at the knee to expose the bump in my sock, and ask the lady in question to reach into the sock and retrieve her jewellery.

I was so delighted by the effect that I didn't question whether it might not be quite what polite company would appreciate. On one occasion I performed for a rather taciturn and unresponsive couple at my residency night in Bristol, and after realising that they were seemingly not in the mood, I left them alone. It turned out that they were friends of some other magicians I knew, and were weary of the ways of the thaumaturge. When I heard through these mutual friends about them, and received feedback about that performance, one of the things that the couple had rather disdainfully remembered was that I stuck my foot on the table and made the lady stick her hand down my sock. Hearing it like that, I realised how inappropriate it had been. I, who am so careful to remove any disparaging, humiliating humour or references in my performance, had made the crass mistake of glaring impropriety. I was deeply embarrassed, and immediately removed the effect from my repertoire.

Aside from issues of propriety and taste, choice of appropriate material should lead one to be ruthless. Let us consider a clear fact. If

you were able to provide a link with a magical world and cause it to shimmer through for the wonder of all concerned, you would not be using card tricks as a vessel for this. Unless you make some absorbing and plausible qualifications, a deck of cards will give a clear message to an audience that sleight-of-hand trickery is about to ensue. If you are to perform magic that feels real and has an aesthetic and emotional impact that renders it unnerving and wonderful, card 'tricks' (i.e. those light-hearted routines that delight in the antics of the cards) cannot be at the heart of your performance.

Card 'tricks' *do* have their place in the model of Real Magic, as those delightful fireworks for solo violin have their place in the symphony. That is their home. Displays of skill, magical in theme. Regardless of how heavy the patter, cards changing and transposing will be taken to be the results of comfortable skill, not a call from an esoteric underworld which the performer would try and harness.

I am very specific about how I deal with the issue of the appropriateness of playing cards. I have a few effects using cards that can be included in my main routines. One is 'Plerophoria,' given in *Pure Effect*. This uses the deck cards as a unit: they are shuffled by a spectator and I can name them in order while turned away. There is no 'handling,' and I am performing something conceptually very simple. There is no 'business,' and no plots or contrivances. A second effect occurs as an apparent explanation of how much of the mind-reading is done: three spectators each pick a card, and I ensure them that they will each give away the cards that they have picked. The first does so in a richly entertaining and utterly plausible way, as I explain my techniques. With the second I show how quickly the card can be arrived at. The third is named, piecemeal, by another spectator who has not seen it: I use verbal technique and gesture to force the right choice of colour, value and suit. All emphasis is on

the clues given off by the spectators, each desperate not to give away the identities of their cards: it is a richly human and amusing routine, with a three-fold progressive structure. The third routine I use is an effect, also described in *Pure Effect* where a friend of the spectator, called on the telephone, is able to identify a card in the keeping of that spectator.

Each of these three routines is of a mind-reading nature, and none delights in the cards *for their own sake*. The end result, hopefully, are routines which play much larger than card tricks: they are about the personalities of the people involved – about the signals they give off, how well they can lie, or the impact of geography in the case of the telephone effect.

Other than these effects, I keep my card routines very separate from my main set. If I am to spend time performing for a group, my priority is to affect them deeply with rich and plausible magic. Nothing about what I do for them will alienate them unless I choose to make them feel very self-conscious for a moment. The sight of cards is not conducive to magic that claims to transcend the ordinary.

The strength of card effects lies in their elegance. When I perform my card material professionally, it is usually at a champagne reception, where my aim is to provide a sophisticated focal point to the mingling. I set up my table, with its green velvet cloth, and invite a few guests to join me. I choose men rather than women, for the former are generally more interested in such things, and I allow them to feel a sense of 'Ah, we are experiencing professional card-magic now of the best kind. This guy is so smooth.'

I will perform card material early in the evening, mingling it with some conjuring effects of a non-mental variety, to gain interest and achieve rapport, and have some fun with the group. In my mind, I am following the logic that I am getting to know the guests and gathering my wits, to later move to the 'real stuff' once I have a psychological handle on the group.

In order to play up the elegance, I do need to create a sophisticated environment. The table, combined with my costume and manner, allow me to do this. If I must mingle with the guests, I never use a deck of cards, for then the controlled elegance is too easily lost.

In short, card routines can be very lovely, and your audience will probably be divided between those that love them and hate them. But few card tricks will have the resonance of real magic: their appeal lies elsewhere, in the display of immense skill that they offer. They should be kept separate for that reason, and presented in a way that focuses on their strengths, with the emphasis on elegance and professionalism.

I am, however, no longer inclined to use card routines that lack any humanity. Although card tricks may always suggest manual dexterity rather than links with the underworld, I see no reason why they shouldn't be richly warm and visually beautiful. They *can* resonate a feeling of artistic magic through the extent to which they provoke a purely aesthetic response from the spectator and engage her emotions. For example, a trick where the red and black cards keep separating, however cleverly achieved, is not an engaging or human plot. I have a well-structured and baffling Oil and Water routine of which I am proud, but I cannot for the life of me find a presentation that lifts it out of the category of 'Yes, very clever.' The Ambitious Card left my repertoire years ago, and I have never had

any desire to find the four Aces in a puzzling manner (unless I were demonstrating gambling subterfuges to an interested group). One must be ruthless, for to create magic that fills the air with an unnerving wonder, one treads a very narrow path.

I take it that we are in agreement that sponge balls, finger-choppers and lengths of rope can happily be excluded from the list of vehicles for wonder. I have, as I have said, very little use for coins, other than in a few mental effects. In coin magic, the little devils move magically from here to there, and for a real thrill may suddenly become quite large. This is not enough for me, and again, I suggest that if you insist on performing coin magic, keep it separate from what you are coming to develop as real and wondrous.

Once you are clear what should *not* be performed, your efforts should be taken up with developing presentations for the routines within the scope of propriety that are already in place in your repertoire or which you find commercially available, or ideally designing routines that are born from an absorption of this model. I will discuss the creation of such effects later. But for now, it is clear that you will need an arsenal of weighty effects, and probably one's that have that intimate and ethereal quality that good mind-reading offers. It will be difficult to create a plausible and affecting experience if you can only make a card jump to the top of the pack.

Environmental Issues

As I write, the sun has just set over the not un-Dickensian view from my bedroom after a glorious summer's day. The air is still warm, the window is wide open, and I am sat here stunningly naked. Summer is the time when this happy magician takes his little beard and appears at the slightly horrible garden parties of the rich and ludicrous. Enormous marquees, ornamental lawns, half-pints of Pimms and married cousins abound in their formulaic way, and through them I mingle bringing fresh and lively magic which, though it doth pack flat, playeth big.

No American reader of this volume (and it *is* a volume) can appreciate the sensation of attending one of these uniquely English events. Imagine rich ladies who don't have much sex trying to be the Queen. I *have* performed for Her Most Lovely Majesty at several of her Royal Garden Parties at the beautiful Swindon Palace, and the one thing that one cannot accuse her or her parties of being is pretentious. She is, after all, the Queen. One cannot say to her, "Who *do* you think you are," because she would be able to reply, "The Queen." There would be nothing to say in return, and one would probably have one's cock officially cut off for being so churlish.

While on the subject, bad tricks to perform for Her Majesty include the one with the bra and handkerchiefs and anything involving patter about interbreeding. Gambling exposés are a fond favourite of The Queen Mother but card tricks are generally frowned upon in the Palace ever since Hollingworth got drunk there one afternoon and threw up noisily over five of the royal corgis. It was reported in the tabloid press that he got into a fist fight with the then Princess of

Wales who was hogging the bathroom and went home with a broken face and ruptured nipples.

Garden parties, for me, mean Everyone Standing. No tables, awkward surround-system viewing and related angle considerations. Once they are eating salmon in the marquee I can join them at their tables if I must in the familiar way, but during the reception I am faced with the need to change several routines to take into consideration the peculiarities of the environment. However, the real issue that these events present to me is that of *propriety*. The fact is that a magician at a garden party, if he is to do his job well, has a duty to blend in with the overall aesthetic of the afternoon. Where does this leave our uncompromising vision?

I have spent many years performing 'walkaround' magic and am grateful for the fact that I can now insist on giving my performances their own space and no longer need to mingle. But the issue of incorporating your performance priorities to fit the difficulties and opportunities presented by the venue is a vital one.

These garden parties, to begin there, events have, like any gathering of course, a social code. Sincere and intense provocation is as inappropriate as breaking wind in the Pimms bowl (another infamous *faux pas* on the part of Mr. Hollingworth). Where people are delighting in the rigours of civility, a paid entertainer must of course respect that desire. Most often, one must mingle and amuse. The aesthetic of mingling and amusing does not sit well with our model of real magic. To present real magic, a tone of seriousness is fundamental, and there is no room for such a tone when one is the mingling amusing person at an event of contrived frivolity.

It is not so much the case that the vision need be compromised. Rather, in order to be a sensitive and ultimately *more* magical performer, you will need to 'pace' the aesthetic of the event before directing your role into other areas. By this I mean simply that if 'non-threatening' is the key, then so you must begin, in order to gain rapport with your audiences and gain their trust and respect. I say 'respect,' but the air of detached amusement that can be provoked at these occasions is absolutely crippling. Nonetheless, your task is to charm your way to greater miracles, and in the same way that you would not thrust a pack of cards in a diner's chewing face by means of introduction at a restaurant, so too you must take great care to act with all propriety at these events. This despite the fact that you will see yourself as a fawning jester.

Then, once that rapport has been gained, it is possible to change the tone somewhat. You will still remain charming, but your demands on the spectators will intensify. For me, a clear difference that evolved when I circulated at these events was the control of performance space: at the start of the event, when rapport-gaining and amusement must be the key, I entered *their* space and offer some charming routines before moving on. It still revolted me, but there we are. Later, however, I would ask a few to sit with *me*, as they do now, and I will request silence when I need it, even brushing away the catering staff who mingle with trays of dolly-food.

It is of course vital that you have a genuine sensitivity to the spectators, and see how far you can comfortably push this. Inappropriate arrogance or uncomfortable demands will spoil the aesthetic of the event. You are there to enhance things, not detract from them. But on the other hand, remind yourself of the basic fact that so often goes amiss. Of the drive behind this book. You are not a juggler, nor a mere amuser of the middle-classes: you are a *magician*.

The main task of that wonderful job is to lift people out of themselves. You are a connection to a wondrous world, and if you forget that and just become a mingling trickster, then you are undercutting yourself, and denying yourself the shiver of an unrivalled type of job satisfaction. In keeping with our model, it is vital that you transport people: that in some sensitive way you challenge the comfort of the social context. In places where the posh gather and talk about silly things, you must gradually, softly, sound a bass note that rumbles. You act with caution, and you pace the mood of the event (and you don't cloud that judgment by swigging too much of the Champagne yourself), but you remember that you are there to create magic... and you bide your time.

At the other end of the extreme, there was a time when I would find myself performing for noisier and less sexually repressed crowds. This would happen in bars and less formal parties where I would be paid to entertain. Here, the same rule applies: it is your task to transport them out of the presumptions of the environment. You begin by gaining rapport, with a relaxed and easy-going tone. But once that has been established (which will be much quicker than in the case of the garden party), you must then lift them to a higher plane through making the magic rather incongruous with the banality of the surroundings. It is tempting at these events to play around with a deck of cards and take the whole thing lightly or more crudely, but this is the equivalent of never surpassing polite mingling over salmon and caviar. So, conversely, the answer is to shift into a more sober, elevated and serious tone, and to play on your higher-status mannerisms and speech, if you have them. I certainly do. In other words, you make them imaginatively look *up* to the magic: to see it as something compared to which the bustling of the party is trivial and banal.

It is the same process: gaining rapport, and slowly pulling the audience into a more controlled and 'magical' space. Whereas the formal tone of the garden party will be challenged a little in order to bring the spectators out of themselves, here we may find that introducing a note of formality will do the same trick. So although the magical mood will always be similar, aspects of it will be defined by the social situation that one wishes to transcend. I repeat though, it is *vital* that you can do this while bringing the spectators with you. Otherwise you will simply lose the rapport that you have established.

Perhaps the most unpleasant common working environment must be the brawling corporate event of three hundred inebriated businessmen pulling crackers and yelling at each other across the dance floor. The hotel suite, the floral arrangements in the centre of each table, the dreaded party poppers and noise-makers next to each plate, the moron who comes in fancy-dress, the resentful waiting staff, the band's sound-check before dinner – this is a string of clichés that make these events of a uniformly and predictably wearying nature. Yet they are the very same events that we dreamed of regularly working at when we began: the Elysian Field of Corporate Work was a beautiful and shimmering destination point as we trudged our way through cafes and bars looking for regular work. Those non-professionals reading this book can be delighted that they are spared the humiliation and horror of table-hopping at such nasty functions.

Never having worked as anything other than a magician, I have never attended one of these corporate events as a guest. For all I know, they may be absolutely delightful from the point of view of the dining delegate. Perhaps I would revel in it all, and perhaps I, too, would stand and make to remove my trousers if a magician

should ask to see my ring for a moment. ("Ah, I see now, Sir. I said *May I see your ring*, referring of course to the item of jewellery, whereas you, in an almost amusing misunderstanding of words, thought I had said *Stand up and pretend to show us all your fetid arse you charmless, witless, bidet-straddling oaf.* How utterly hysterical.") Presuming that I will never wear a suit with a stripy shirt and drink lots of lager in a hotel conference-hospitality leisure-suite, I shall only see these events from the point of view of the performer. Again, much can be gained by *not* having to do walkaround, but for now let us look at this most common situation.

Creating the experience of Real Magic at these events is almost impossible. That is predominantly why I hate them so much. To be proud of one's performance when one is having to shout to be heard over the crass and the ignorant is a very rare thing. (I may sound disparaging about these businessmen. That's because I hate them.) There is almost nothing that can be done. However, you must remain true to something. Upon approaching a table, you should make a beeline for a lady, hoping to find a more respectful and less awkward person to involve in your magic. Introduce yourself and shake hands with a few people, and just force the atmosphere at the table to a more respectful one. It doesn't always work, and you can only expect to achieve so much.

At these events, you will *have* to keep things light-hearted. You will simply humiliate yourself if you insist on slow and sober performance. I use a lot of pick-pocketing at these events, which has an up-beat quality to it which, although in stark contrast to my normal style, allows for the best to be made from a difficult situation. I steal watches, handkerchiefs and ties as I perform my routines, (and now, if performing close-up I am happy to perform a lot of magic as well as the mind-reading they have paid me for), generally

to the immense amusement of the group. This is also about gaining rapport, in the way I have already mentioned. I then finish with the floating ring routine, exactly as described, involving one woman suddenly very seriously. By this point I have gained their respect and attention with the faster-paced fun stuff. The idea is to pull them out of that light-hearted state for a moment and leave them with something quietly disturbing. They won't quite take it in at the level that I can ensure happens quietly in a room with fewer distractions, but it serves its purpose of providing something out of synch with the environment. Sometimes it's a struggle, but sometimes it can be good fun, and the enthusiasm from a drunk group who think the world of you can be a small reward.

But whither our model? It is simply the case that if you must table-hop or mingle, the control of performance space is almost an impossibility. The best that you can do is have a very good and very entertaining style of performance for just these events. When I worked these venues under these difficult circumstances, I felt I was reverting back to the magic I used to perform. Of course, that isn't true, for anyone who changes their magic for the better and learns to perform in a more resonant way will never quite revert to old form. But if you have to sometimes feel that you have compromised your calling and just come across as an excellent sleight-of-hand magician with an entertaining personality, then so be it. That's still better than most of them out there. It's a brief frivolous cadenza again against the solemn adagio of your real work that grows over the years.

This certainly raises the issue of flexibility of vision. Either we see the situation of the noisy corporate function as the failure of our vision, or we incorporate the necessary response on our part *into* the vision and make it more well-rounded. Let us consider this. Our vision is about performing real, believable magic. It is not *actually*

real, at least to our intellects and probably to many of the intellects of some audience members, but it is *emotionally* real, to us included for we believe it at that level. Sometimes, in that model, mere displays of skill and having fun will be appropriate: for these things establish character, gain credibility and establish rapport. Therefore, at events where having fun is the only option, it can be congruent with that wider model to keep the magic safe and fun. It does not mean that we feel that magic *should* be about being safe, only that it is appropriate on these occasions to create an atmosphere of fun for a moment and keep it light-hearted, while our greater vision for magic rolls on quietly. While certain aspects of the performance may suffer, the vision need not. It is not threatened by the need to produce frivolous nonsense occasionally, *in the same way that a painter's vision does not suffer if he is asked to doodle something on a napkin.* Again we see the difference between seriousness and solemnity: and to be most serious about one's vision one should not be too solemnly precious about it. To do so would leave it open to threat, and to render it a precarious pretension rather than a deep and reverberating belief.

Designing with Cause

Creating Effects according to the Real Magic model

As we have discussed, most magic performed by most magicians takes us no further into a dramatic mode than the exercise of will. He clicks his fingers or sprinkles some absurd dust and before you can say, "Don't patronise us, you unimaginative performer with no histrionic sensibility," a length of unusual white rope has been rent asunder and cleft in twain.

In this situation, no *cause* to the magical effect is offered, other than the will of the magician. This endows the magician with the role of First Cause, and therefore he comes to play an omniscient role. Magic-man is god. Which is fine, but we don't believe him. Which is fine, if we don't need to: if we take the whole thing in a tongue-in-cheek way. Very often that will be a healthy and appropriate response, and these effects serve, as I have said previously, to establish the skills of the magician and provide a layer of texture.

But there is that problem of belief, and this is why I think that these considerations are immensely practical for the working magician. No intelligent spectator really thinks that you can cause the cards to change identity or turn face-down one at a time through the ancient ritual of esoteric 'twisting.' The same applies to almost all magic presented in this way. The more the effect requires only an exercise

of will, the less believable it is. There may still be a moment of magic if the effect is presented skilfully, but that magic will be more akin to transient surprise rather than reverberating, unnerving wonder. (I'm trying to stop saying 'resonant' now so I hope you're comfortable with 'reverberating.') All the audience will know is that something they saw didn't happen, because magic isn't real. If the magician isn't making any effort to address this basic problem and give them space to find it real or something akin to real *in some sense*, then the moment of magic will only extend so far. It is here that magic becomes perceived as skilful trickery. The response to this sort of effect is, "Wow! You're very clever. I don't suppose you can tell us how you did it."

I feel something die inside me when I hear the response, "You're very clever." My cleverness does not speak of a magical realm that I am allowing them to glimpse, it does not speak of an emotional truth that they have learnt for themselves, and it does not speak of art. Occasionally I know that it is given almost in embarrassment: I have had people visibly very moved by some effects and in a fit of resurging Englishness, they have quickly reframed it as something clever and non-threatening to be complimented (and therefore kept at a safe distance). That I can live with. I can always just stare back at them and smile sadly.

At the other end of the speculum, there exists a type of magic that sacrifices all for some kind of message. It has run ahead to the end of the drama and is concerned only with the audience's understanding of the piece's dramatic vision. It seeks to deliver a communication, and the effect will work, usually metaphorically, to impart that.

Immediately we are in a very different type of magic from those that depend merely on a unilateral declaration of will, for now we are

looking at magic with a point. Gospel magic and the type of trade-show magic that is designed to promote a concept or product are linked by their focus on imparting a message. I do not warm to either of these presentational angles, but once we start looking at final meanings, it is clear that we are giving the magic room to expand. When Darwin Ortiz begins a set with "Let me show you why you should never play cards with strangers," he is setting up a very simple contextual frame for the effects that follow to endow them with meaning. This is framing the performance with meaning: when he ends with the similar words, "and that's why you should never play cards with strangers," he has ensured that the spectators perceive a point to what he has done. And there is new learning for the spectators, for they now know to be more careful when around unfamiliar card players.

There are plenty of message-heavy effects given by writers most concerned with darkly laden presentations. Mysterious metaphorical tales are wrought and played out through the tearing and restoring of cards, the linking of objects and the familiar phenomena of magic, all of which have their imagined primal meanings revealed by solemn presentation. However, I am sceptical. As I have said, there is no essence in magic to be revealed, only what the magician communicates about his art. A performer can become very involved in what he perceives to be the symbolic value of his plots, and miss the fact that in actual performance, the communication of meaning becomes ludicrously disproportionate to the effect. This is the other end of the extreme from magic that is trivialised and performed meaninglessly and without style: instead we have magic that is often performed pretentiously and with a style generally inappropriate and embarrassing.

Where the incorporation of meaning is handled sensitively and with a clear sense of what actually works, then we will have a piece of magic that points somewhere and speaks of the vision of the performer. I am not concerned here with communicating a wider social, political or spiritual vision in my magic. In my model for understanding powerful magical performance, the message is the performance itself. The vision is, as I have mentioned, a deftly-wrought mixture of character, material and dramatic finesse to provide a deeply affecting show. I aim to achieve that, and am sometimes happy with the results. In our model, it is still important that the magic connect with the outside world and have meaning in the lives of the spectator. I would like it to connect with life and take root, but *as magic*, not as a tract.

The main bulk of drama, however, is concerned with struggle and conflict resolution. Some magic does wander into this area, but rarely commits at any real level. The declaration of will begins the drama, the message and learning ends it, but this is where tension and empathy are most generated. In magic this need not be grand, but it stands a far greater chance of being interesting.

The traditional Ambitious card effect, where the card is placed repeatedly in the centre and jumps to the top at the will of the performer, has not reached that conflict stage. The performer may patter ineffectually about ambition, but such a plot device has no meaning to offer, and is clearly a presentational *excuse* for performing a series of sleights. In fact, it is a mere nod in the direction of meaningful context. (Some performers, trying to make it more 'meaningful,' might attempt to relate the movement of the card to some aspect of life – like ambition, or, God shield us from this rubbish, the 'power of a woman' when performed with a Queen. We have all seen such nonsense. The reason why these well-intentioned

presentations fail is that there is no conflict or challenge for the performer.) As part of the texture of a long set, such skill-displays may be perfectly valid, as I have said. But there is no meaning to the effect as classically performed. Neither is there any conflict or difficulty on the part of the performer. It refuses to be human, or dramatically engaging. A twist in plot may allow the imaginative performer to include this. How would it be if the aim of the magician were to put the card in the middle?

Imagine this: card number one is selected and signed by spectator one, and returned to the pack. Card number two is chosen, *sight unseen*, by spectator two and left on the table in front of her. "You have a one on fifty-two chance of removing the signed card... if you have, the next part won't work." The magician then announces his aim to make the signed card jump to the top of the deck. A click of the famous fingers, and it is done. It is shown to be on the top. "Thank you, now I shall try the same with the second card," he says, casually placing the first card back in the centre of the deck. "At the moment, the top card is the –" he begins, but as he turns over the top card, we see again the signed card. "I thought I put that back in the middle," he mumbles, and loses it again in the deck. But suddenly it has returned to the top. He clearly does not understand why, and the effect is eerie. He can't seem to shift it from its place. Then he relaxes, giving up... but now it has disappeared altogether.

It doesn't seem to be in the pack. Nor in any pockets. "Did you actually see it?" he asks the group. They reply in the affirmative. "I think we were all just *expecting* to see it. I have a feeling...it wasn't there at all... this has happened to me before..." and he reaches across to spectator 2's card, still face-down, and turns it over. It was the signed card all along, untouched on the table.

A few ambitious moves, and a switch at the end, and we have a real piece of weirdness. Like a good 'sucker' effect, it allows the sense of 'something has gone wrong,' but unlike a sucker effect, the spectators don't feel like suckers. What we would have there is a situation where the magician is caught out by his own trick. He attempts to control change in the world (by whimsically making a card jump to the top of the deck, which is not interesting), but the world has caught him out: it can't be done, because the card in question is not in the deck. Yet we are toying with a magical realm: a ghost of the card appears in its place, or maybe the perceptual manipulation is so convincing that we just think we have seen a card that was not there.

In this effect, the magician loses control. This would be anathema to the average magician, but most average magicians would find it hard to act the part convincingly to make it work theatrically. In our model for understanding magic though, the magician is not God: he is a human figure with a link to the magical realm, and sometimes that link must cause him suffering. Loss of control becomes a dramatic point and bolsters the appreciation of the magic, much like a juggler purposefully dropping a ball or two. If our magic is to be plausible, we must remind them that it is not simply a case of clicking fingers or making coins travel from hand to hand. There is *investment*, and therefore risk.

Again, I must repeat: this is all to provide texture. One effect in a set where the magician loses control of the situation in this way would suffice. This alternative handling of the ambitious plot is given as an example of turning around a dramatically unsound narrative and creating an engaging point of weirdness: it is not a formula for every trick. As we think now about forming effects, I cannot emphasise enough that it would be far too heavy-handed to make every effect

pregnant with drama or conflict, lest the whole idea miscarry and your audience simply cannot swallow the ensuing mess. (An unfortunate metaphor perhaps, but you get my point). But there are certain ideas that are worth bearing in mind as effects are formed, which can colour the routines and raise the whole to a higher level.

'Magic' is about influence. Magical powers are not about end results, but about the endowment of the individual with gifts, and the method by which he can 'magically' achieve his aims. The change in the world (the turning into a frog, the appearance of the rabbit) is the *result* of the magic. *It is not the magic itself.*

Again. The magic is the process, it is what *causes* the effect. The home of magic is between the declaration of will (I choose to have this card change) and the result of that declaration (the card has changed). How exactly the magician's will becomes reality is where the magic happens. The magic is the *cause* of the effect, *the effect is just the part that we see.*

If it seems that I am making an obscure point, let me expand. Returning to Teller's words and our discussion at the start of this book, one reason why magic is generally such bad theatre is that it deals only with effect, and ignores cause. *How* the card changed does not interest the magician, only *that* it did. Yet the age-old response from the spectator is "*how* did you do that?" – a cry for causal reasoning. The magician, missing the woods for the trees, thinks only of a series of effects. The cry of the audience is a clue to what his concern should be: the placing of the magic at the level of cause. In this way, a series of isolated routines (effects) becomes connected by an underlying connection of magical cause. This is not merely to silence the question of 'how,' for it is unrealistic to never expect it to

be asked, but it creates a feeling that the 'how' has been accommodated. In doing so, the magic has become plausible.

Let me illustrate this by returning to the concrete example of that floating ring. When a bill is floated, what is the cause of it floating? Trickery is the immediate answer. When the ring floats, the spectator is concentrating on moving the ball of light inside of her. The ring and the emotion are linked by sentimental association. The movement of the ring is a metaphor for the spread of the feeling, and its ascension is an instruction to be delighted. There is a reason, suggested by the whole theatre of the thing, how and why the ring moves. There is cause and effect.

Now let me move a stage further. The cause and effect are not of this world: they follow according to the logic of the magical realm to which we, as magicians, have a connection. So if we specify the cause-and-effect in human terms, such as a New-Agey energy thing, such as "... And as you concentrate, the energy will travel down your arm and cause the ring to move," then it ceases to be magical. It becomes human, and without wonder. The presentation that I gave for the ring effect allows for the connection between the spectator's mental actions and the movement of the ring to be understood emotionally and unconsciously.

This way, cause is given without the wonder dying a death, which can so often happen in mentalism. The nature of most mentalism, as I have mentioned, is generally to answer questions, not raise them. "I have this skill X and I use this to achieve these results. This is how I do it." Whether X is a psychic ability or finely-tuned inter-personal skills, the answer is given. The agenda of the mentalist is normally different in this way to the magician, who should create wonder, not merely a marvelling at his own skills. (And leaving the question

Psychic or Fraud? open is a poor substitute for real wonder. Here, the performer is merely pushing the audience into a polemic, and undercutting much of the power of his performance).

Cause by metaphor, however, as in the case of the ring, is a genuinely magical conceit. It is open-ended, wondrous, and it presumes intelligence on the part of your audience rather than patronises them.

As magic stands, the question of 'how' is an embarrassment to the performer. It will seem sacrilegious to many to even be writing about it. To him, concentrating on the effect only, the question of the actual exercise of magic is literally waved away with a wand. Dealer effects that produce a flash of light or a puff of smoke on command still only highlight the visible effect, they offer no clue as to the *power* that caused the change. That must be left to the performer to see if he can deal with this question in his routining, his approach and style, so that he can produce magic that shimmers in three dimensions, deeper and more wondrous than the thin sliver of interest caused by the appearance of clever manipulation.

Sometimes an existing effect can be taken and these ideas worked into the presentation. Often such an effect will have to be changed to facilitate meaning and the possibility of depth. A finger-ring appearing on a key-fob, for example, has little meaning. It's a neat trick, but difficult to think what its appearance there could resolve, other than the question of to where the ring has disappeared. But to make it resolve something meaningful would be tough. Therefore many performers work with a borrowed key, which starts to make more sense. Keys are a little cold as items, unlike the sentimental associations of jewellery, but they may serve as associations for home, security and so on. Red and black cards separating are not

inherently interesting, but the idea of harmony being restored, and balance being redressed, are.

For me, as I sit in my quilted silk dressing-gown at the harpsichord and dream up new effects to the sweet rapture of the Goldberg Variations (I'm sure we'd both agree that the *Canone alla Terza* of the ninth variation is particularly conducive to the stirring of the Muse), this thinking is fundamental to the earliest stages of the creative process. I tend to begin with a feeling of how magic might emanate. It is not as cold as logic, but there is the question of 'how' before there is the question of 'what.' Not 'how' in terms of actual method, for this is the very last thing to be looked at, but 'how' in the magical sense. Perhaps a metaphor comes to mind. In the stories and novels of Kafka we see how he begins with a metaphor: the impenetrable castle, the over-arching world of the Law, the notion of one's sins being carved upon one's skin, his being a 'parasite' in the eyes of his father. These metaphors are realised in his stories, each is played out literally and develops the feeling of myth, and each resonates with an inner congruity that makes it whole and somehow holy. We feel the metaphor, sense the metaphysics in his stories, and do not question their logic or absurdity.

Such is the power of metaphor. A popular and effective communication tool favoured by those that delight in modern therapies is to tell, say, a story that mirrors the condition of the patient (sorry, *client*) and offers an idea that may create powerful change for her. But because it is offered indirectly, as if the therapist is talking of other things, the client can take only what is useful and disregard what is irrelevant. In making the connection with her own plight *herself*, she will in many cases accept the message at a deeper level than if she was just told what was good for her (which she may be defensive about). For example, I was sat with a friend-of a-friend

in my home who had half of his right little finger missing. (I mention that he was not a direct friend, for I would hate you to think that I would keep regular company with spastics.) I noticed that he was self-conscious about it, and had developed a number of efficient techniques for keeping it hidden. I mentioned it late in our conversation, and asked him how it had happened. Simon (for it was he) told me that he has blown it off in a chemistry experiment at school when he was fifteen. I expressed how cool that was. Did it make him self-conscious? Yes, especially around women that he liked.

This seemed a nice opportunity for a 'metaphorical intervention' as some would have it. I told him how it reminded me of an (imaginary) student I had known in my first year at University, also called Simon. (The real Simon was a student.) He had two fingers that were heavily webbed after some horrific birth defect. I laughed and said how he would use the anomaly to get pretty girls into bed. He would sit them down and get into conversation, and talk to them about having babies and mothering. I mentioned to the real Simon how he would elicit in them 'mothering' states by choosing his words carefully and then would anchor the state to the idea of hands. He'd talk of babies' hands, of tiny fingers grasping adult ones, and so on. He would tell them of his own mother, and of the problems she met during pregnancy, and he would do so in such a way that aroused their sympathy and feminine propensities even more. Then, at the right moment, he would show his hand, and the girl in question would see it, by now, in the way he desired. I spoke of how it became a powerful seductive technique, and how he had several of the rugby-playing lads faking little weird things on themselves to try and achieve the same success.

Now, I was making it all up, and whether or not the techniques I was saying that this imaginary Simon used would always reliably work was irrelevant. The point was to reverse this chap's presumption that his missing demi-finger was a big minus point when it came to attracting the opposite genital group. And it worked. I spoke to him about it a few weeks later and he told me that the story I had told about my friend had made him see it in a whole new light.

I acted, of course, surprised.

The intervention was effective because I allowed him to make the connections for himself. In a magical presentation, a similar process will occur. There is a fondness for metaphor amongst magicians concerned with serious presentations for magic: Burger and Neale's book *Magic and Meaning* talks much about this. However, as I have said, a magical routine might be loaded with metaphor and mean very little to anybody. If one is to use this type of structure, one must begin with an idea that will connect with the spectators and be appropriate for performance: i.e. it must be absorbing and magical.

In the ring effect, the ring moves as a visual metaphor for the imaginary processes of the spectator. As she steps back into a lovely memory and learns to recreate that feeling and in doing so attach it to the ring as a powerful trigger, the ring acts the whole thing out in sympathy. "Your heart soars and your spirit rises" is a metaphor, and the ring caries out the action in reality.

For a while, I used a similar process with the Oil and Water routine that I have referred to before. It is a great routine, and I very much say so myself, but like the 'Ambitious Card,' it has no meaning beyond a display of skill and trickery. So I used the following idea. I

asked if anyone had heard of the *matsu*. I explained that in magic, as one moves away "from the sleight-of-hand end of things" to "what magic's really about," one will often learn a lot of martial arts skills in the process. If you say this with a straight face after a bunch of mind-reading and watch-stopping effects, they will believe you. The *matsu* is the process that the martial artist goes through to put himself in a calm and balanced state, with the confusion of the day washed out of him. A very useful thing to be able to do, I ventured, and there would always be agreement from the group. The trick would begin to form: I would talk about how confusion is a piling up of different ideas... as I dealt reds and blacks into an alternating, face-up pile. Then I would talk about how the artists would create their state, and how in that state, nothing appears to be confused... and the cards would now have separated. This time the spectators would do it: I would have the principal spectator alternate the cards and take four in each hand. Then she would close her eyes and enter a relaxed state through my suggestion. Upon opening her eyes, she would be holding all the reds in one hand and the blacks in the other. For a finale, I would mix the cards, have her enter the state with her eyes open, and separate the cards face-down as she felt appropriate into two piles. Upon checking, she would have perfectly separated the colours. For a finale, they would spring back together into alternating order, which had always been my climax. It didn't sit well with the story but was a real punch of an ending. This bothered me, but the real issue was that I found the story too sickly-sweet. What worked well with the ring was too much for an 'Oil and Water.' However, if you are more given to such things, you may wish to consider the idea.

The context I now use to present the effect is as follows: I explain that I have been a magician for ten years or so and learnt by setting myself challenges and practising until I could achieve them invisibly.

At that age, I continue, I believed it to be about sleight-of-hand and deceiving the eye, and it took me many years to realise that that was not what magic is really about. But one of the first tests I set myself was as follows: I remove four red and four black cards and have a spectator place them in a face-up pile so that the colours alternate. He takes half the pile in each hand, and I place my hands over his. I explain that my task is to separate the colours in his hands without him feeling a thing. I ask him to choose which colour he would like to remain in each hand. "Seriously, this takes about three years to do perfectly," I add, and give his hands a gentle squeeze. The cards are shown to have separated.

"After some years I came to realise that magic had to become something intuitive rather than physical... so let me show you what you can achieve without any sleight-of-hand knowledge." I offer him the chance try something herself, as I shuffle the cards. I place them in a face-down row and have him pull out all the ones he feels are of the same colour. He does so, and the results are perfect. He takes the piles of both colours and I have him place them together for a moment... and in an instant they reassemble into their original alternated position in him hands. Big finish.

This is far more light-hearted, and carries with it a slightly disarming message that yes, sleight-of-hand exists, but no matter how well it's done, it's not what magic's really about, and that what I will be doing cannot be explained by such things. It's still a card trick, and I don't very often perform it for it still strikes me as cold. But it now has a lot more interest to it than rubbish about the colours having different weights. There is nothing charmingly whimsical about the weight of printing ink, and something definitely patronising about selling that idea to your audience. Again, that embarrassed nod towards the notion of cause. That's not what magical suspension of

disbelief is about. Such nonsense asks for a *willed* suspension, rather than bypassing critical faculties and being directly affecting.

This improved handling is no longer a metaphorical one. The *matsu* presentation was, but it was flawed and cluttered, and rather trite for my tastes. Both deal with the issue of cause, and the issue of 'how' is abundantly covered. In the new 'Oil and Water,' however, the open-endedness of the answer to 'how' is designed to gently challenge the spectator's ideas as to how magic is achieved. It would work if performed prior to a metaphorical piece such as the ring levitation, but would be crippling if performed afterwards: once this Oil and Water has taken people beyond the expectation of mere sleight-of-hand trickery, the spectators have been prepared for more resonant pieces. To return to the theme of sleight-of-hand (if only to refute it) after a stronger metaphorical piece would be horrendous. Placed in the correct order, the routines that make up the set can carry the spectators to a higher level of appreciation, which gives some point to their journey.

Rather than beginning with a metaphor, I often find that a pleasing image forms and turns in my mind and an effect is built from this entirely aesthetic starting point. In *Pure Effect* I give details for the Figaro Transfer. This is a simple, almost-at-fingertips transfer of a card from the right hand to the left which exchanges the card simultaneously. The cards remain backs towards the audience, not parallel to the table: therefore a continuous clear view of the 'card' is offered throughout. When I first played with this move to see where it would take me, I saw an opportunity for a very clean torn-and-restored effect. A picture card would be signed, and as both hands approached each other to tear the card (kept face towards the audience) the transfer move would be made a split second before the tear. The palmed selection in the right could be retained, and the

duplicate torn. The card could then be restored in whatever way might appeal. After the restoration, I had the switched-out pieces lapped. It occurred to me that if I palmed the pieces in my left hand as the restored card was displayed in the right, I could repeat the same exchange movement as I brought my hands together for a moment, snapping the card into Tenkai in the right hand (thus vanishing it) and releasing the pieces simultaneously from the left. The effect would be that the restored card could not hold itself and had separated again. I showed this to a few friends, and the consensus was that the illusion was utterly convincing. As the pieces fluttered to the table, the eyes dropped from the hand that palmed the card to the table, and I relaxed back, lapping the card as I blew the pieces into the air.

There was no doubt that it worked, but I had no interest in performing a torn and restored effect. I dislike anyone even signing my playing cards, as I like to give them a sense of importance in performance. The act of tearing the card is something I find ugly, and restorations unconvincing. But the transformation! It was beautiful. Eventually I hit upon the idea of rose petals. I could hold a card at fingertips and have it dissolve into beautiful blood-red rose petals. Far more beautiful.

Why would a card change into petals? It clearly had to be the climax of an effect, so somehow the notion of a rose had to creep into the presentation. A simple enough idea would be to have a card selected, which would transform in this way and 're-appear' by means of a duplicate in the floral centrepiece on the table. The idea of sticking a card in such an arrangement without being seen appealed, but as these things are right in the centre of the table, it seemed difficult at best. Far more beautiful, I thought, to incorporate the metaphorical idea and have the rose as a mental image, which

becomes real at the end. I returned to the effect 'Zamiel's Card,' given in the same volume, and changed the wording. The routine is now as follows:

A deck of cards is spread on the table from the last effect. "I first began experimenting with magic at the age of six, when I saw a street-performer do something that we would probably dismiss nowadays as trite: he produced a rose out of thin air and handed it to a lady. As a sensitive child, I thought this the most beautiful thing imaginable. I practised for weeks to achieve the same effect, having it in mind to woo my sweetheart at school, the then Debbie Boon, almost ten and something of a fox. I practised pulling a rose from my sleeve, for I had been told how it was done, determined to get it just right before approaching her. Eventually the day came and I was ready... I found her on the playground and whipped the dishevelled flower from my sleeve. Thorns caught my wrist, and petals fell to the floor, and she turned back to her friends and laughed. I dropped the rose and ran away, and cried under the climbing frames until English. It wasn't until after school that she came and found me, clutching the petals in her hand, and gave me a large kiss full on the lips.

"And that's how it began. Of course at that age I didn't really know what a deck of cards consisted of – " (I look at the spread cards and gather them up), " – all I had was the imagination of a six-year old – " (we look again and the cards have vanished. Big gasp from the audience.)

"So can I ask you to think of one card that you can see?" (I fan the imaginary deck for a mental selection). "Thank you. Now perhaps you would cut the deck a few times and I shall attempt to find your card." (I reach over to the imaginary deck and remove a real card

from the top, back towards the audience. I look at it, pass it to my left hand (executing the Figaro Transfer) and place it in my pocket. I reach over and pull off another. And another, and a whole series of cards going one at a time into my pocket. Eventually I stop on one card, which I hold face towards me.) "What was the card you had in mind?" - *"The Two of Hearts."* "The Two of Hearts – two hearts – I suppose... the classic card of love." (I turn the card around. It can be seen to be the correct card for a moment, but then dissolves into rose petals, which are blown across the table.)

It is a sweet routine, and again, the impact of the finale is drawn from an emotional meaning, which the audience finds for itself. The cause of the transformation is clear at a symbolic level, and speaks for itself without needing to be spelt out.

There can be no formula for creating a little artwork, and it would be ridiculous to try and give one, even though I am setting out this model as I see it. But one thing is clear to me: in the same way that we learn to move away from starting the creative process in magic with questions of method and to begin with effect, so too we should learn to move beyond the local effect and allow ourselves to sometimes begin with something more abstract, more feeling-based. Where this leads to the notion of a specific effect, that effect will encompass a wider vision and communicate something more resonant than the trick itself, which is our aim.

Of course inspiration will come from all quarters, and sometimes it will be a neat new move or a question of method which moves us. But if we cannot then look deeper than those, then we will present, at best, elegantly performed tricks. These have their place, and add texture to routines, but in my mind they do not entirely suffice.

There are no formulas because anything that qualifies as art must be created from scratch. All we can do is train our sensitivities, much like an actor develops his emotional abilities or a gourmet his palate. With this sensitivity to drama, to meaning, to structure, beauty and the issue of cause, we can then draw inspiration from anywhere. And of course we spend a lifetime developing that ability. The particular way that these abstract notions come together for us individually – and what we reject or insist on as having importance – will shape our individual vision, and therefore the way that we design our routines.

Relating to Performance

Few things make me more livid than insultingly bad theatre of any sort. Conversely, perfectly realised and exquisitely elegant performance can move me deeply and reduce me to sobbing like a big girl. Seeing for the first time good actor friends, whom I already respect and love, act in something where they excel invariably moves me deeply. I have insufferably high standards as regards these things, and when people whom I know go out and meet those standards, I am always transported. In all other walks of life, I am very difficult to affect in this way. (Although I was happy to weep stinging tears at *Sunset Beach* every morning when it graced my little electric television set. Now it is no more, and performers like us must find some other reason to get out of bed.)

Seeing Tommy Wonder perform for the first time brought a lump to my throat. The moment that the birdcage lifted was so exquisite that tears came to my eyes. That is the only time that magic has ever really moved me. It was a perfectly realised moment in a beautiful routine.

Tommy, as with all very good performers, has a love for the art in himself. The other option, and the one that I wish to warn against, is to love oneself too much *in the art*. This distinction, made by Stanlislavsky, is very much worth discussing in relation to magic.

I remember accompanying a friend to see a small show in London. Part of the entertainment consisted of the attempts of an effeminate man to sing and act his side of a love story. It was dreadful. He could neither sing nor act to any worthwhile degree, and his attempts to do either were deeply embarrassing. Yet throughout it was the clear

sense that he *absolutely loved the fact that he was doing it*. When he received applause at the end of a number, he seemed to visibly swell as he absorbed it. The performance would have been far more honest, and equally revolting, if he had climbed up on stage and masturbated for an hour.

Afterwards, I went backstage to meet the other half of the duo that comprised the show: a talented comedienne who had performed professionally and wonderfully. While chatting with friends after the performance, I saw the camp would-be-music-theatre-luvvie flounce into the room and collapse onto a sofa demanding a Martini. I watched and listened as all his friends told him how great he had been. He offered transparent objections to their flattery: "Oh no, I was dreadful tonight... really I was awful.." while they were quite happy to lie to his face and tell him just how *strong* he was. How *great* and how *hysterical*.

I stood, fuming. Not only had this man insulted us with a terrible evening's entertainment, but he was clearly wanting only to hear how good he was. His whole reason for performing was self-gratification. He loved himself as an actor, and that was why he did it.

Personally, when I have finished a public performance, my priority is to first of all go away a bit on my own and mull over how I felt it went, and to have some moments to adjust before joining any friends. When I do join people I respect after a performance, I am really only interested in knowing what could be better. What worked but what, more importantly, didn't. If I have performed badly and have people *lie* to me and tell me I was good, then I am being encouraged to atrophy: to stop moving forward and developing what I do.

Anybody who performs should love the art in himself, and be very wary of loving himself in the art. The difference is clear when we watch a performer who clearly thinks he's great but has no connection with the audience. There are plenty of them, and many think they perform magic.

One problem with magic is that too often, people are polite in their responses, and we think we are getting away with methods when we simply are not. I hope you have had the experience of overhearing a spectator correctly guess exactly the method you used to achieve an effect that you have honed and worked on for years. In such situations you wonder how often this happens and you simply don't hear. But there are enough dreadful magicians around for us to know how easy it is to perform magic badly and not get any feedback. Where, after all, could that feedback come from? Not from the public, who would in most cases pretend to be fooled out of sheer pity. Not from other magicians, who will be generally unlikely to be able to offer a layman's reaction. For an art that relies entirely on the experiences of the spectators, it is remarkably difficult to find out what those experiences are. We cannot finish an effect and then immediately have the audience dissect their experience of it to provide us with useful information. Yet that is exactly what we need.

The only answer is to seek criticism humbly and greedily. This can be done without compromising your vision. Yet sometimes the experiences of your audiences would surprise you, if only you knew them. When I heard that a spectator in my restaurant found it vaguely distasteful that I placed my foot on the table and had her remove her ring from my sock, I was embarrassed by how obviously inappropriate behaviour that had been. Yet I probably would have continued, for the revelation of the ring was a very good one for all sorts of other reasons.

If you find yourself automatically defending a routine when it is criticised, then I believe you stop moving forward. This does not mean that you have to accept every criticism and adapt accordingly: for then you would be a poor artist indeed. Instead, you must learn how to react to criticism in a productive way: and this is a skill that extends far past performance into life.

The bad effeminate actor mentioned earlier would have taken criticism impossibly personally, because the reactions that he gets from performing give him a sense of who he is. He needs the reaction of a crowd to feel worthwhile. Insecurity amongst performers is not uncommon, but if it hinders your art (rather than causes you to pursue it relentlessly) then it can only be detrimental. His focus was entirely upon himself, and therefore any issues or questions arising instantly became personal. However, where your focus is on the development of the art within yourself, or on the growth of the performance piece as a separate thing from you, then there is no personal threat involved in criticism.

Paul Daniels once said to me "If criticism is constructive, listen to it. If it's not, ignore it." That, and something about name-dropping. This is an easy slogan, but I am unsure of it. If I were to attract a lot of personal, *unconstructive* criticism from people who had seem my performance, it would do me well to listen to it and try and get behind the insults to see what was going wrong. Often people are just rude, but their reasons for being so may be of relevance.

People who can take criticism well simply stand back from whatever is said, and think in dissociated terms as they run the information through in their minds. Those who get upset and cannot deal with it, and therefore never learn, turn criticism into a personal issue the moment that they hear it.

Here is a simple exercise, if you feel that you find criticism difficult to deal with. Think back to the last time you were told something that would count as critical, and which upset you. Hear the words being said to you (presuming that they were spoken) and see what they trigger. Generally they will trigger a feeling and mental images, and a need to fight back with something.

Now realise that in order to be the best you can be, you will sometimes need an outsider's perspective on how your life or performance looks. Sometimes this can be of immense value, and it is certainly very useful as regards magic. Think back again to the criticism, but instead of hearing it being said *at* you, imagine a film of the incident that shows both you and the critic in conversation, or however the incident happened. See this mental film in black and white, on a small screen at arm's length. This is the opposite of the way you would represent memories of things that move or upset you. To react emotionally to something, you have to represent it in an *associated* manner: i.e. as you experienced it *at the time*. By seeing yourself in the picture and running it from a third-person perspective, you literally gain *distance* from the incident and a more *detached perspective* from it. Now see the version of you in the picture mulling over the criticism offered. See him make his own detached mind-film in the same way, a film in which he sees his behaviour from the point of view of the critic, and ascertains whether the criticism would have been reasonable *to that critic at that time*. Let that version of you decide whether or not change would be worthwhile: let him run films that show different ways of behaving, and see if any could work better.

This way of thinking is absolutely vital. If somebody criticises your performance, you *must* instantly be able to see the performance from a detached perspective, ascertain why the criticism might have been

felt, and what, if anything, could be done to change things for the better.

This is not to compromise our vision, it is to help us reach it. As a performer, you should see criticism as a positive thing. Clearly you want it from people whom you respect, and people who understand what you are trying to achieve. As long as you know what you are trying to achieve, you will, by practising this detachment, see whether you are getting closer to your goals or not. Decent, intelligent criticism is pure gold to us: value it highly and seek it out where you can.

Cold and Nasty

As magicians, we manipulate. Manipulation is generally seen as a dirty word, but it is not. Tit is a dirty word, and to 'trombone' somebody is also an unsavoury expression. Manipulation, however, is a neutral expression. Teachers manipulate their pupils. Therapists manipulate their clients (although therapists are the very cock-cheese of Satan and anything they do is as dirty as dirty can be). We all manipulate each other and play out gentle power-struggles in our everyday conversations.

Magic, in fact, depends upon an ability to deftly manipulate an audience into experiencing the impossible. Correctly done, this manipulation will elevate the spectators, for wonder is a delightful thing. Often mentalists prefer to provoke awe at their powers, for mentalism is, as I have said, too often about showing off an imaginary skill rather than creating a moment of wonder outside of oneself. I am all for provoking awe at my imaginary powers, understand me. But I feel this can be done subtly and indirectly, and in a way that captures the imagination of the audience, rather than patronises them.

The manipulation that we aim to achieve is one that brings our audiences to a lovely place where they can experience something that magic *exclusively* offers. Witnessing the impossible. Quite in contradiction to this would be the kind of manipulation that lessens the spectator's sense of self, and limits her understanding of herself to an arbitrary vision imposed by the manipulator. Surely it would be anathema to us as artists of wonder to cause her to see her limits rather than transcend them.

My concern here is the practice of cold-reading. Mentalists pride themselves on their skills in this area and often preach its efficacy with an evangelical fervour. It seems acceptable for a hired entertainer to sit someone down and make personal statements that are seductive and believable to the credulous, or at worst even offer messages of reassurance from loved ones beyond the grave. I know of one mentalist who, while mingling at an event, took it upon himself to offer a message of love from a miscarried baby to a still-grieving woman. His defence was that she found the words comforting.

I am unsure what sort of person would comfortably offer such a message, let alone when working outside of a therapeutic environment. But even without sinking to those depths, it is undoubtedly common practice for mentalists to play on the common insecurities from which most people suffer. I'm thinking of statements like, "You enjoy company and like to present quite a tough exterior, and one which people respect you for. But when you come away from such gatherings you tend to replay conversations in your head, wondering what impression you made on people and what so-and-so meant when he made a certain comment. This sensitivity and worry is in contrast to the laid-back and secure veneer that you present. You know when you're just putting on a show of confidence, and how shallow it can be."

Surely this is a fantastically unpleasant thing to say to anyone. True, many cold-readers say only brief and flattering things, but how convincing are they? Ironically, unless you are supposedly uncovering the insecurities of the sitter, you will not give the impression of knowing her at all.

Now, the ideas behind cold-reading do fascinate me, and I know from having practised it in the past that I am good at it. There is no doubting the strength of its effect when it is done well. I now feel that I have arrived at a solution to my dilemma that allows me to produce the powerful illusion that cold-reading offers but without a hint of the unpleasantness that is in the very roots of the common variety.

It began a while back in the lounge-bar of Byzantium Restaurant in Bristol, where I have my residency. I had asked a spectator to call a friend and have him name a playing card. I had a card face-down on the table and it was my task to manipulate the friend, through the phrasing of the spectator's instructions, into choosing that very one. But in between the termination of the telephone call, and my telling the spectator to turn over the card, I paused to give a description of the friend just called. I began with a few vague statements, but as they began to hit, I kept going. It made the entire effect genuinely astounding, and the final revelation of the card miraculous.

The spectator in the restaurant was a white male aged in his mid-twenties, with shoulder-length dark hair. He was dressed casually and wore sandals, and I could see that he smoked roll-ups. When he called his friend, his opening words were, "Hi – Verne, it's Chris." When I began to give instructions, I told Chris not to give me any clues about his friend: in particular not to say his name (obviously he already had but I knew that would pass as forgotten).

I gave the following description, after Chris had hung up the 'phone:

"Now let me get an image of your friend in my mind. I'm seeing a male, in his mid-twenties... in fact quite a good friend of yours. You have known him for a few years... but he has moved away recently

and you don't see him as often. He lives in Birmingham now, I believe. [This was correct, and provoked some interest. I based this only on the fact that I had seen the friend's number come up on his mobile 'phone and recognised the dialling code.] He has hair lighter than yours but shorter, and is musically inclined. He plays the guitar, though he has also dabbled with keyboard and electronic music. He also has particular notions about spirituality, or at least self-awareness, which you kind of share [I was generally describing my impressions of Chris here and watching for positive reactions]. You two talk a lot about women and relationships. Ah, now he comes from, I think, a fairly wealthy family, is that right? [The name 'Verne,' short for 'Vernon,' certainly has class associations. This was correct, which gave me more clues]. He is, however, very cynical about his parents, and has spoken to you at length about that. Quite strong political views too. I'm getting a name, an odd one, begins with a 'V'... 'Victor?' 'Vernon?' (I used the full name so that it wouldn't sound too familiar)..."

And so on. Afterwards, I reflected upon what had happened. The brief 'reading' secured me a booking there and then – I was invited to perform at Chris' birthday party the next week. Verne, interestingly was there. I was in a dilemma: I did not like cold-reading yet had not felt bad giving that one. The response it got made me want to work more frequently with this tool, yet I usually felt a genuine distaste for it.

The answer, of course, became clear. This reading had not concerned the spectator. It had not been about Chris. It did not limit Chris' perception of himself and make him view his life according to my arbitrary vision. It was about someone else, and had all the strength of a good reading without the moral problems that bothered me.

Similarly, the cold-reading technique can be applied to situations and incidents without causing the kind of moral difficulties which would otherwise concern me. For example, I was recently demonstrating mind-reading at a presentation given by an advertising company in Swindon. (For American readers who may not know Swindon, it is a beautiful old rural English piece of paradise and well worth a visit if you come to England. It is kept secret, so you will not find it in all the touristy travel guides: just get on a train and go.) The chap next to me, one of the advertising group who had hired me, opened his diary to write something in it. I saw that he had marked against the following Tuesday, "Dental Appt." and underneath that had written the name (one Dr. Garten) and full address and telephone number of the surgery. That was all the information I had, but later on was able to give quite an expansive reading based on the glimpsed information:

"Nick, I was looking at you earlier on, and I saw – this sounds odd – a *garden* in your mouth. [I was leaving him to find the connection with the dentist's name] I don't know what that means. I thought about it and I feel that your teeth are calling out. I see you visiting a dentist – a specialist in some area, but it's not a major job like a root canal. [He had written 'Dental Appt.,' not whatever the surgery was to achieve. I imagine that if it was for root canal work, you wouldn't write something as bland as 'Appt.'] This is a new dentist, not one you've seen before [he had written the address: why would he if he knew the place?] and its not near where you live, it's a bit of a journey. [He had written the *area code* along with the rest of the telephone number , which again would have been unnecessary if it had been a local surgery]. You're not particularly bothered about going, which is good – you don't get nervous like some people. [He had written in large, confident handwriting, which, without getting

into the nonsenses of graphology, didn't suggest to me apprehension about the appointment.]"

I waited for a reaction. He said, "I know you looked in my diary."

Bugger.

All I could say was, "*Diary*? I swear to God I did not see your diary."

Further examples come from a routine I perform where I have a person think of a childhood memory. This can be revealed and elaborated on through a mixture of cold-reading and billet or pre-show technique. This routine particularly good for using this form of reading. The last time I performed this routine, it was for a student at a party, and the glimpsed information read, "Pecan pie at the cottage." You might want to give yourself a moment to see what you can deduce from that brief phrase. My reading went as follows:

"Now, picture in your mind the scene, whatever it is. [Pause...] Oh, that's interesting. It's a little older than people usually choose: this is a memory from seven or eight, is that right? [She was eight. After all, you wouldn't want to eat pecan pie much younger than that.] And there's you, and... some other kids? This is a group thing, isn't it? [Well, pecan pie takes some effort, so I guessed that there'd be a few people there.] And, oh, that's odd, you're at home, *but you're not at home*. What does that mean? [*The* cottage, note. Neither *Grandma's* nor anyone else's. It had to be theirs, and it had to be a holiday home] I see Summer outside, and plenty of greenery. Maybe some water close by, but definitely woodland. And this is somewhere that you regularly visited with your family. Ah... it's a treat, isn't it. Something your mother made... she's very creative, as are you: that's something you've picked up from her. You don't study

English, do you? [A gamble, but she looked the type. And my phrasing of the question would have given me a way out. But I was right]. She is an excellent cook. Ah, is this something to do with cooking? Is it a tasty treat? You all used to get together and have this, and it was something of a Summer treat in this lovely place. What was it?"

I didn't mention 'pecan pie,' and I didn't ever say 'cottage.' In fact, I asked her to tell me what the treat was. In my mind, I was seeing her picture. Rather that describe what she had written, I began to describe the picture that she was seeing: which was far more impressive. She was visibly shaking and really freaked out by this piece of mind-reading. I don't think I could have performed anything stronger, and the strength came from making certain deductions from a small piece of information.

Performing the same routine another time, for another chap in his twenties, the information read, "Playing guitar." Not much upon which to elaborate there perhaps, but again I invite you to see what you would have made of it.

"I want you to visualise the memory for me. [Pause...] that's a difficult picture to see, because you're looking down at something quite close to you: there's not much to pick up on. Shift your view so that you can see yourself in whatever the situation is. [Pause...] Ah, that's better. Oh, that's interesting: I said to choose a childhood memory but you've gone for something a little older: I can see you aged eight or nine. [He reacts very strongly to this. He was indeed nine years old]. Yes, that's very clear. Now this is a particular activity, as opposed to something more general like a holiday. In fact this is something that when you were doing it at that age, you had ambitions which have still not been fulfilled. [If he is thinking of

guitar playing as a *memory*, then I can safely assume that he no longer plays. This gives me some scope.] This is something that you continued with for a while, and your interest peaked around age sixteen/seventeen. Correct? [Another big reaction] And then you stopped. Now, I'm seeing you – well, either as an only child, or one with a big age difference between you and your... [he has not reacted to 'only child' so I keep going]... brother? Is it a brother? Yes, at least two or three years difference... [I am confidently backtracking on the age difference because he was clearly wondering about whether it was that large. But this was going nowhere. I was imagining a kid sitting in his room playing guitar a lot, and it suggested to me something of a loner, with a lot of time to himself]... but this is something that you spent a lot of time alone with, and in fact I'm seeing you sat on your bed. That's odd... this never really went out of the confines of your room, though later on you involved a couple of friends... does it involve any kind of auto-erotic stimulation? I'm getting this kind of action... [I mime the strumming of a guitar with my right hand and he laughs]. Yes, it's something like playing a guitar but it's not a guitar... was it a banjo or something? Oh, it *was* a guitar..."

Again, I am concentrating on building up the picture, not getting to the information that I have glimpsed. In fact, I will often get the final details that correlate with the written information slightly wrong. Had it not been for the strumming joke, I would have probably identified the memory as keyboard playing. It is also far more convincing than a lot of cold-reading, or ways of revealing written information, because I am genuinely describing the picture as it occurs to me. I am doing exactly what I would be doing if I were actually genuine, except I have a few clues to start me off.

Using similar processes, I have told a girl who wrote "when we got Bouncer, our dog," that the dog in question was a spaniel. I did this first of all by being aware of the social class of the girl, then dropping in earlier that she was thinking about the arrival of a friend at the house... a blond person? Her eyes widened at the mention of a friend arriving, but she didn't get anything from the mention of blond hair. That cut out golden-haired dogs. Thirdly, with a name like 'Bouncer,' it was going to be neither a huge nor a slow dog. I made an educated guess and was right. More recently, a girl wrote "going away with my parents." Aside from this telling me that she was an only child at the time, (she writes 'parents,' not 'family') it didn't suggest to me a foreign trip, so I started to describe a summery scene and lots of greenery. It made sense that it would be the South of England, so I guessed Cornwall. It was correct. Both girls freaked out. The reactions are always enormous. The girl with the pecan pie spent the entire few minutes during the reading with her hands over her mouth, turning to her friends and saying, "How does he know? How does he *know*?" The chap with the guitar was absolutely stunned that I knew that he started playing at nine and gave up at seventeen.

I would recommend this type of 'reading' to anybody interested in performing powerful mental effects. I generally have tried to get the spectator talking about his experience of the reading afterwards, and the general response is one of being genuinely spooked.

These effects are very close to demonstrations of 'psychic' power, which I find a dull and unimaginative line to take. My reasoning is that the spectator will give me all the clues that I need, and I tell her as much. I make it clear that she is telling me everything I need to know, which in a way is true, apart from the fact that I was a step ahead of her. This kind of 'explanation' is far more interesting than

the simple polemic of 'is he real or fake?' Properly handled, it is plausible and far more involving for the spectators. It tells them something about how human beings communicate, and makes me far more intriguing rather than inviting suspicion.

If you are unsure about how effectively you think you can create the effect, the answer is to simply see what picture comes most readily to mind when you read the information and see what you can deduce about such factors as the subject's age, environment, and the peripherals of the situation. Because you have the trump card handy to play - that is, you know what the memory is already – you can afford to meander around for a little while and bring it to an end if you don't feel it's getting anywhere. You are padding out and expanding on a theme, and after a while this extra material will become the routine itself, and the words on the paper incidental to the effect. And above all, you are able to practise and exercise these skills without overstepping the lines of propriety and taste.

Setting the Stage

We have all had our moments as magicians that make us proud, usually having something to do with an astonishing coincidence working in our favour. Recently I was having dinner with a family who knew my trade, and the eldest son, aged about nine, was eager for me to show him a trick. In such situations I generally allow my behaviour to suggest that they would be extremely lucky to see any magic from me. Not that I say those words out loud. I would never have dinner with anybody if I voiced such sentiments. But I allow my manner to suggest it. I feign a certain, but not a decisive, reluctance. I strung this kid along as much as I could, in the back of my mind wondering what I would show, if indeed anything. I had, of course, as fate decreed, forgotten the sponge ding-dong. Eventually I decided I would wait until dessert and then read his precocious prepubescent mind. He was impressed by the playing cards I had with me, so I decided to use them.

Here is what happened. By the time dessert arrived, this boy was finding it difficult to suppress his impatience. His parents gently chastised him for continually hinting, and each time they did I caught his eye and smiled naughtily, which only made him worse. Eventually, I withdrew the cards from my waistcoat pocket. I looked him right in the eyes, then took them out from their case and gave them a one-handed riffle shuffle. He was mesmerised. I spread them out in a long, slow ribbon spread across the table. He had a look of complete seriousness on his face, which was matched by the expressions of his parents, who had suddenly become just as

intrigued. I looked up at him and waited for him to look back. I held his stare and smiled knowingly. "Jeff, why don't you take one out? Go on, they're right in front of you."

He reached across nervously and pulled one towards him. He looked up at me, silently asking if he should look at it. "Go on, take a look," I said, gesturing at the card with my hand. He turned it over.

The air suddenly surged in his lungs and his eyes widened. He stared at the rectangle of cardboard in his hand and absolutely *froze.* Then he flickered, and looked over at his mother, then back at me. *"Oh my God the Five of Diamonds mummy how did he know? How did he do that? That was it, that was it..."*

His parents looked at me with uncertainty in their faces and I gathered up the cards and put them back in my waistcoat pocket, ready for another day.

I still don't know exactly what happened. It seems that he had had the card in mind before he picked it. I didn't ask, I just kept the knowing look on my face for a while, then steered the conversation to other areas. I still see the family, and I have never shown Jeff another trick. When I do, it'll have to be a good one.

Such are the moments that we live for. Jeff experienced a shiver of real magic, and his parents will never be able to give him a satisfactory answer. Now, imagine if the same coincidence had happened and I had been a jolly entertainer with a grating voice and a penchant for making unconvincing poodles from balloons. Imagine that I had asked him to pick a card and he had chosen the one that he had happened to have in mind, for whatever reason. He would have searched for meaning and perhaps would have still been

surprised. But would he have done all the imaginative work necessary to turn it into a wonderful miracle that he is going to remember well into his adult life? I doubt it.

It is vital for our model of magical performance that we set the scene with subtle drama, suggestion and presence. When we do, we create a sense that what we are about to perform is of importance. This is a luxury open to us as workers of real magic when we are asked to perform in a social, non-professional setting. Imagine: we can teasingly show reluctance, we can spend an hour's conversation setting the psychological scene before the effect, and we can restrict ourselves to the performance of a single item. These are beautiful opportunities. In order to exploit them fully, I *never* ask if anyone would like to see a trick. If there is something that I would like to show, I drop a hint in conversation and allow it to ferment. I always manipulate them to ask *me*, and presume if they don't that it would have been a bad idea anyway. The hint that I drop is not that I might have something to show them. It is merely an intriguing reference to the experience of magic, combined with a certain glint of the eye and a seductive glance. That way, I can feign reluctance and intensify their desire.

With this in mind, the moment of performance has a gravity and sense of profound anticipation before I have apparently done anything. Yet that paving the way for a certain responsiveness from my participants will create the conviction needed for Jeff's miracle to take root, and render my companions far more suggestible than otherwise.

Compare this to the mood that is generated if you ask, out of the blue, if anyone would like to see a trick. A certain percentage will be enthusiastic, but there will usually be a note of cynicism struck when

the offer is made. Similarly, I find most 'attention getters' rather wearying, and am unsure about using striking pieces of visual magic to 'reel people in' (such as Tommy Wonder's *Fifty Per Cent Lighter*, suggested for this purpose, where his empty lighter changes to a box of matches to allow him to light his cigarette). This latter technique has about it a note of self-consciousness that I believe an intelligent audience will come to realise and eventually find rather sad. Imagine you are seen smoking, and suddenly you push the lit cigarette into your ear and pull it out of your mouth. You did it to get the attention of somebody because you would like to perform some magic with the group. Someone responds, genuinely amazed by what they saw. Obviously you have performed the impromptu piece in such a way that did not seem to be self-conscious, and you did it well. A conversation begins, and you say that you are a magician. One thing leads to another, and you are soon performing a few tricks.

All very well, you may say, but it does not take long for that first person to realise that you must have been using the cigarette effect to draw attention to yourself. However much they enjoyed the tricks you performed, I am unsure about leaving someone with the impression that you were eager to do a bunch of tricks and sat there dropping visual hints. This does not seem in line with giving your magic a very high prestige. It makes it seem a little trivial, and you something of a nerd. It gives me the same creeping feeling that I get when I see magicians carrying around their props at all times for when some situation arises. What would be your perception of a man who casually performs a few tricks in a bar for his friends, and then suddenly produces lengths of rope from his pockets and starts to perform? Would you cringe? Most probably, for it advertises the fact that he is always ready to be Mr. Entertainer, and happy to be seen to be so.

I carry nothing with me when I go out, unless I need to practise a new effect and need guinea-pigs. But even then, I would not carry anything that looked as if I were carrying it on purpose. A deck of cards would be the absolute limit, but I would act as if I were not sure that I even had a deck on me. There have been times when I have gone out with an ITR fixed inside my jacket, a thumb-writer in my pocket and a magnet strapped to my knee – but these are all invisible props. With them I can perform miracles that would be difficult to match without this preparation, but when I use them *I do not appear to have brought anything with me.* No one is going to inwardly groan as I produce a prop.

There can be no nerdiness in our model of magic. We must remember that it is *us* that our companions are experiencing, not just the effects. If that projection of self shows a man who is eager to jump up and be Magic-Monkey at the beck and call of anyone who will talk to him, then *all that is left to be interesting are a bunch of tricks.*

It is the power, again, of withheld presence: the impact made by what you *don't* do, translated deftly and faintly into what you *do.* When I said to Jeff, "Why don't you take one? They're right in front of you," I am making the cards suddenly tempting and forbidden. This, combined with congruent non-verbal communication ensures a heightening of the experience. Seduce people with intriguing and calculated understatement. Give yourself and your art that importance, and the capacity to unnerve.

A Different Look at Pick-Pocketing

It's quite early in the morning now as I type and were it any later I would probably not admit to what I am about to. But I have not as yet bathed, and my Morning Earl Grey in the traditional Morning Smiley Mug is as yet unsipped. I am barely myself.

At University, oh dear Christ, and I make it very clear now that that was many years ago and it doesn't go on any more, but at *University*, before I was even *twenty*, I was what I can only describe as one of the top ten student-level Latin American Ballroom Dancers in the country. Up and down this sweet, clean, green England I could be seen in my faux-silk black shirt with the big open front split to the navel, an embarrassing 'V' lined with pink and silver sequins and which, for some reason known only to Beelzebub and his filthy henchmen, sported a sodding *butterfly* picked out in more sequins across the chest. I did not choose this item, it was designated mine by Di, our dancing instructrix – a charming old lady who ran her own abattoir.

Having donned this shirt and its accessories, making to the world of strict-tempo dance a fairly clear fashion statement (which roughly translated into "*FOR THE LOVE OF GOD WILL SOMEBODY HELP ME*"), I would then whisk Donna, my enthusiastic but rather heavy partner onto the floor with ten other surprisingly unattractive couples and await the music. Donna was also unusually tall and at times I would find myself striking the required Latin pose with the tip of my nose near-inserted into her substantial inter-mammary

cleft. Our speciality was the Cha-Cha-Cha (or simply the 'Cha-Cha,' as those of us in the business refer to it with weary familiarity). After standing in Clenched Position trying not to fart for a minute or so while somebody put on the correct CD, the floor would erupt to the Latino sounds of Ross Mitchell And His Singers' strict-tempo version of TV-theme classics, and your author would proudly shake his booty across forty square feet of temporary dance-floor in the *Belvedere Suite* of the Wolverhampton Corporate Leisure Centre and Bingo Hall.

As my tight twin peaches swung and thrusted to bad music, and as I kept the required expression on my face throughout for three dancing minutes at a time (men are taught to exude an expression somewhere between chewing gum and suffering from painful constipation. Women have it easy: they need only look as if they think they might just be able to smell something unpleasant quite far away), I had little opportunity to question my presence in this room that contained enough sequins to supply a score of Vegas belly-dancers who have been told to wear extra sequins for a special sequin extravaganza. There I was, collecting plastic trophies by pricking around like a big cocking poof, and no one was telling me to stop.

It was hard to explain to Donna, my partner that I had joined the Bristol University Ballroom Dancing Team in *irony*. She cried if we didn't win our prizes, weeping salty dance-tears at being one half of a trophy-less fourth-best. When we did win, I would grab her and strut across the floor to collect our prize, whisking her flamboyantly around me like a dancing cane, except a dancing cane that was a girl. Donna took it very seriously. Donna was Donna of the Dance. I could not take Donna seriously at all.

Then I went to live in Germany for a while, a country fond of ballroom-dancing amongst its youth. These square-set, crazy dudes enjoy the cha-cha almost as much as they enjoy wearing silly spectacles and drinking calcium-rich milk straight from the udder while their cheeks and kneecaps visibly grow. I had a few offers of dance-partnership, but I do not easily find myself drawn to the company of German women. Most appear to have been sterilised for thirty minutes in an autoclave and should be handled with rubber gloves. So I let my youth as the Latin King die, and danced instead the intricate ballet of the Teutonic bureaucratic system as I attempted to live as an official resident.

Southern Germany shimmers and swirls with the arabesques of its religious ornamentation: a façade of caprice and delicacy brought into ironic relief by what must be the least whimsical race on Earth. But I am straying from my point. When I left behind the unpleasant clothes and ludicrous mannerisms of bad dancing, I ended a period of my life that had been an odd and intense excursion into a strange skill, which is most probably never to serve me again. Having been whisked straight from novice into intense Cha-cha lessons, I did not even learn the only worthwhile thing one might hope to glean from such tuition: how to passably waltz with an attractive stranger. I had become adept at something that was to be useless.

Studying Law was a similar experience. I graduated as a law student but never pursued that career of chewing pieces of paper chewed a thousand times before. (Kafka, paraphrase, italics mine.) At the time of writing this, the celebrated cardician and Casanova Guy Hollingworth is undertaking the opposite journey: moving *from* an exclusive magical career into Law. Clearly this is a sign that I have a finer mind, which is a source of great pride.

But it is neither dancing nor Law of which I really wish to speak, but instead the third seemingly-wasted skill area to which our discussions so far have been merely amusing and engaging preludes. The third area, and the subject of what remains of this chapter, is Pick-pocketing.

Here are my essential thoughts on the subject. I was attracted to pick-pocketing after some years performing as a magician, and while I cannot remember exactly how my interest started, I imagine there are few magicians who are not attracted to the idea of a deft watch-steal. I studied the techniques and even bought myself a tailor's dummy, practising with which appeared to be the most flamboyant and authentic way to learn. I became adept at stealing watches, ties and wallets, and have even taken a few belts in my time. For those who have learnt these skills, they are wonderfully addictive. Leather watch-straps visibly *glow* on the exposed wrists of those we meet. An exposed wallet calls out to us in a clear, high-pitched voice, begging to be stolen.

The problem, as I saw it at the time, was that in order to extensively pick-pocket one or more individuals in this theatrical sense, it seemed necessary to have a certain overly-tactile and rather fussy persona. This bothered me, for my performance character could not be any more different. The appearance of clumsiness varies from one performer to another, but there is often a sense of invasion of body-space and over-familiarity that did not appeal.

Similarly, when the subject of extensive steals is obviously aware of the pickpocket's actions, the performance is embarrassing to watch. Yet when the steals are clearly being missed by the victim, and the routine a good one, the result is usually enormously entertaining theatre. I could not settle my dilemma for a long time: I wanted to

perform what I saw as very strong and unusual material, yet I did not want to compromise my performance character.

Eventually, I saw that the skills I had learnt in that area, like the embarrassing episode of the Cha-cha-cha, should probably be left, or in the case of the pick-pocketing, at most designated to fall-back talents for nasty, noisy corporate functions where resonant magic was near impossible to achieve. It was a shame to let it go, but equally it was ridiculous to launch into a pick-pocketing routine in the middle of a mind-reading set. It took a while for me to adapt it to my tastes, and see where it might go.

I had heard of Gentleman Jack, who would perform pick-pocketing with the most charming and detached manner and never be seen to be intruding upon his subjects. That struck me as an ideal to be worked for.

The question persisted: what relationship could pick-pocketing have to the model of magic that I was developing? A cheeky wave of a wallet behind a spectator's head hardly seemed the stuff of strong and unnerving magic. How could it be done without compromising our vision? I shall set out my answers, for I believe we can do wonders with this tool if we approach the art of pick-pocketing in an unusual way.

I shall begin with three points. Firstly, there is no doubt that pick-pocketing has the capacity to capture the imaginations of an audience. It is in essence so unnerving, so *intrusive*, that it is difficult for a spectator to brush it aside in the way he might an assembly of the four Aces. To find that one's tie has been removed over the course of conversation is a very disturbing thing, and not likely to be forgotten.

Secondly, and quite surprisingly, very little attention is given in the literature to the misdirection needed to secure the steals invisibly. Reading instructions in most of the books on, say, how to remove a belt or tie, one imagines that the spectator is standing there just watching you. Generally the methods for removing items are simply efficient and straightforward, whereas the misdirection (where the actual skill lies) is, as a rule, absent from these texts.

Thirdly, the literature assumes that the aim of stealing items is to provide amusement for the spectators as stolen objects are displayed to the group out of sight of the victim. Where this seems to make absolute sense for an act that is primarily about pick-pocketing, I believe that a more subtle use of the skill may be employed, to different ends. Rather then being a clever and entertaining display of skill (and I *do* absolutely love watching it done well in this way) I feel it can also be used with a very different aesthetic in mind. Like, for example, mind-blowing psychokinesis and unbelievably direct telepathic stunts.

Let me begin with this final possibility, to set the scene. Some time ago I was performing mind-reading for a group of people and was aware that one lady in particular was immensely impressed. She came up to me at the bar and asked some questions about what she had seen. We chatted for a while, and I spoke about the psychological techniques that I was (honestly and apparently) using. Then I offered to show her something. I asked if she wore a watch. She replied that she didn't wear one. Did she have one at home? Yes, she did. I asked her to describe it in as much detail as she could, and to tell me exactly where at home she kept it. It was in her bedroom on her dressing table across the room from the bed. I spoke about experiments and investigations that had taken place into teleportation, where an object had, apparently, moved from one

place to another. I explained it in terms of suggestion and hallucination: of the mind fooling itself. I geared her into a state of fascination as regards the possibility of hallucination and spoke a lot about my own experiments with powerful visual suggestion.

I asked her if she was happy to try this with her watch, or whether she would like to choose something else from her room which she could imagine as clearly. I offered her the choice, but she decided to stick with the watch. I held out my hand, empty and palm up, in front of her, and asked her to see the watch there. I told her to build the image of it slowly in her mind. I kept my hand motionless throughout. I asked further questions about it to intensify her imagining of the watch, such as what time she imagined it to say, and I used various hypnotic techniques until I knew that she would mildly start to hallucinate it there. I told her to pick it up and feel it in her fingers, and kept her absolutely focussed. I was not sure how clearly she was seeing it, but she was genuinely entering into the experience of it, which was what I wanted. I explained that the experience of the watch may only be in her mind, but that some people would mistake these mind-pictures for the real thing. Suddenly it became clear that she could see it with complete clarity on my palm. She could pick it up, feel it and so on. She was seeing it at exactly the hour that she imagined. I have never had a reaction from a spectator that expressed such profound bewilderment as at that time. She sat there with a completely convincing hallucination of her watch, and her mind was telling her it was real, which she knew to be an impossibility. I told her that if she thought it to be real, then in a sense it became real. I said that I could by now see it myself, though I described it slightly differently to how she imagined it.

If anyone has had a true experience of magic while taking part in my performances, this lady certainly did.

As you may have gathered, I stole the watch earlier and just struck gold. Clearly her wearing the watch was an extremely rare occurrence, and her presumption was that she did not have it on. She genuinely believed it to be at home. When she came to get a drink and we had our initial discussion about psychological techniques, my plan was simply to let her see that her watch was missing, and then hand it to her. Because I had stolen it long before but had not been asked for it back, I knew that she had not noticed its absence, and would believe that I had stolen it impossibly during our conversation at the bar. She would have been very impressed, but when she said that she didn't wear one, I saw the opportunity for something extraordinary.

By making her visualise it very clearly in exactly the spot she knew it to occupy at home, I was reinforcing tenfold the belief that it was indeed there. The more clearly she imagined it, the more it became impressed in her mind, and the more she invested in the proceedings. I knew that she wouldn't then change her mind and choose to imagine something else in its place when I offered her the chance of working with another item. The watch was just too clear in her mind. Of course, when it was done, I could say, "it's interesting that you chose to do that with your watch. Recently I tried it and a lady decided to do it with her keys, which she knew she had left at home. When I asked you to choose something, did you see some weird animal-shaped china thing? What was that?" I asked this in the knowledge that when I offered her the chance to change her mind, she would have scanned her dressing table in her mind and seen a few other objects, but disregarded them. By mentioning a common dressing-table object at this point, I not only score a bonus

point for a bit of mind-reading, but suddenly she remembers having a *choice* as to which item to use.

That was a lucky day, but these things happen if you have the flexibility to allow them to. Let me briefly describe a more reliable idea, which I use whenever I can, to further illustrate this notion of using pick-pocketing for more imaginative uses.

How about this? You ask a friend if he has a wallet. If he does, you ask him to remove *any* card from it – such as a credit card, a drivers' licence, a membership card or some such. As he removes it, you look away. You tell him to place his hand over the back of the card so that you are unable to see it. I should point out that you are genuinely unable to see the card. You then ask him to concentrate on any sequence of numbers or similar thing that the card may contain. We shall imagine that he is looking at his credit card number. Taking a scrap of paper, you ask him to think of one of the numbers towards the beginning or end of the sequence. You *tell him that number*. Then, starting with that number in your mind, you impossibly, beautifully, start to call out the string of numbers, writing them down as you say them. Perhaps you get one wrong at the start, but your accuracy is enviable. You do nothing other than what I have said, and you can repeat it with a different card should you wish. You may thus read the number on any card without going anywhere near the wallet.

This I performed for a friend a while back, a friend who has seen many of my shows. This he remembers as the best thing he has ever seen.

If Joe reads this he will be very disappointed. Given the premise of this chapter, the essential working of the effect should be clear. It's easiest with friends. Only acting skill is required. I had access to his

wallet at an earlier date (perhaps he'll remember now as he reads this that he once left it at my house by mistake?) and noted down all the card numbers, together with a brief description of what each card looked like from the back. I then put this piece of paper in my wallet and allowed myself to forget about it. A month later, I found it again, and chose the best moment. I caught a glimpse of the back of the card as he removed it from his wallet, and the rest was just creating a miracle. I realise that this wasn't exactly pick-pocketing in this instance, but I shall describe below how to perform this as a piece with a stranger.

The strength of this effect was so powerful that some time later, Joe took my own wallet and pulled out my credit card. He challenged me to tell him the number. I feigned reluctance, but indirectly encouraged him to persist. My main excuse for not trying was that he might think that I had memorised my own card number. His reply was, and I remember these beautiful words to this day, "No, come on, I think I can safely assume that you don't sit around learning your own credit card numbers. Now, come on."

I resigned to his persistence and slowly told him my Visa number, memorised through years of ordering magic props by telephone.

The main issue as regards stealing an item for this type of effect is that the pick-pocketing is never revealed. Nobody should know that you even have the skill, unless you can clearly and convincingly separate these effects from any earlier steals you may have performed. In fact, you would like that one possible method (*he would have had to have stolen my watch earlier from my wrist when I didn't notice and then counted on me being mistaken about not wearing it.* Or, *he must have stolen my wallet, noted down all the numbers, then* ***put it back again*** *before we started...*) to sound so ridiculous that it is simply

dismissed. In other words, you are dealing with pick-pocketing as a means to an end. If you are not letting the group know that we are stealing, certain issues arise. Essentially, you *cannot be seen to be doing anything*. That may sound obvious, but most pick-pocket steals are designed to be seen by the group, if not by the subject. Hiding this is primarily a matter of physical blocking and misdirection. Nor can you be seen to be fumbling or over-familiar, because there will be no reason for it offered. You will just seem nervous or rude.

Let us now look at the issue of technique. The steals I use are essentially standard, but here I shall concentrate on the misdirection involved. Plenty of videotapes and books offer the student the work on watch-stealing, so I shall not go into enormous detail. Later I will discuss the vital area of returning the goods (which takes on extra importance if the audience does not realise that anything has been stolen).

Outside Pocket

This is the steal I use to perform the credit-card effect described above. It is the easiest steal, and because you must return the wallet, ease and accessibility are paramount. Best done with someone standing, you position yourself facing the spectator and a little towards the side from which you wish to steal. You need to have a reason to open their jacket wide for them on that side. You open the jacket with the hand on your opposite side: in other words, opening the jacket will block your other arm from their view, allowing it to make the steal. Several entirely justifiable reasons suggest themselves.

- Asking the spectator to hold the jacket open so that you can gain access to, say, his jumper, to perform a cigarette vanish there. You open the jacket on both sides, one at a time for him to take. Opening the first side, you make the steal.

- Asking him to place an object in his inside pocket. You open the jacket so that he can gain the access he needs.

- Asking him to remove an item from the inside pocket.

- In a situation where you are not, as yet, performing, but wish to secure an item early, you do have the brazen option of complimenting him on his jacket, and asking if you can peek at the label. You then open the jacket before he does. This may suit your character, but it tend to telegraph that you might be up to something. Ironically, it works better when you are not performing, as the request to feel or inspect the jacket is something that may occur naturally in real life, but seems odd during performance.

In some of these situations, you can casually make a mistake. There may be no inside pocket on the side where you look, but he has one on the other side. Or you ask him to remove the item, but you offer him the wrong side. He corrects the mistake and looks on the other side... but for a moment you have the jacket correctly open on the side you desire.

Quickly and fluidly, the other hand, blocked from view by the open jacket, dips into the side pocket and makes the steal. Because the jacket is away from the body, it will not be felt. I take whatever is there, unless I am specifically going for the wallet which I have seen the spectator place there earlier.

It is an easy, standard and invisible steal. It does not need much in the way of misdirection, for this is normally incorporated into the reason for opening the jacket. Normally no more than two fingers are needed to make the steal, gripping the items in a scissor-like pinch. Because my hand has swung up from my side to his pocket, I tend to continue the movement after the steal and place my hand behind his back. Then I can comfortably place the item in my pocket after the event.

If we do not wish to telegraph the steal to the group, it is simply a case of using the jacket and the side of your body to block their view as well. Because you have not skipped a beat with this steal, there is no reason to show it. You have not been seen to indulge in any odd tactile movements with the spectator, so there is no reason to justify unusual actions by showing them what you have achieved. For our purposes, this is important. In some circumstances, however, and ones that do not concern us here – such as where the mood must remain upbeat and light-hearted, displaying the item over their shoulder for the rest of the group to see can be very entertaining.

Very often I find myself in this situation when I am performing my presentation of the 'Invisible Deck.' It plays as a serious piece of hypnotic control and allows me that moment to open the spectator's jacket for him to secure the cards in his inside pocket. If I have removed a wallet, or just a credit-card wallet, I finish the effect and bid them a farewell. Around the corner, I open the wallet and embark upon the dodgy project of writing down all the numbers on the cards as I have described. Then I join the group again a little later, depending upon how long I think he will go without realising what is missing.

I perform a few more mind-reading effects, until I am ready to close. At some point, depending upon the circumstances of the venue, I either sit myself next to the spectator and quietly return the wallet, or I might ask him to shift from one seat to another and replace it then as I guide him across. Again, this need not be a frightening moment, and in reasonably crowded venues, this is an easy task. Care should be taken when the spectator is seated and the jacket is hanging open at the side of the chair: the shift in weight as the wallet is returned may be noticed unless he is moving for some reason. It is useful to ask him if he would be kind enough to pass you some object from the other side of the table, or to engage in some similar brief activity that will necessitate his looking and leaning away for a moment.

When I come to perform the effect, I try to be seated opposite the spectator in question. I ask if he has a wallet, gesturing into my inside pocket as I speak. It is a subtle point, but it will guide him to look in that pocket first himself, before going into the side pocket where it is located. It reinforces the idea that you do not know anything about it or where it might be. As he removes it, I remove the list of numbers and place it on my lap. I take a napkin from the table and a pen from my pocket and place the former near my edge of the table.

A brief word here. There is something priceless about scribbling on napkins. It is the epitome of an unprepared, impromptu and spontaneous effect. If I am professionally performing, I only use a pad as a last resort. There is a big difference in my (finicky) mind between a memory of me bringing out my own notepad and writing down received thoughts, and scribbling them on a napkin or a piece of paper torn from a cigarette pack.

In this position, I can look directly at the information on my lap although I will appear to be looking at what I am writing on the napkin. When I ask the spectator to think of a digit towards the beginning or end of the number, ("rather than in the middle which is more confusing"), I see from his eye movement which end he is looking at, and then name the second in from that end. Occasionally it will not be the digit he is thinking of, but he will tell me that there is indeed one there. I can then usually guess it correctly the second time. Obviously if the opening digits are, say, 117145..., and I see that he is looking at the start of the number, I will name the 7 as the more likely choice than one of the 1s. This is a nice way of beginning to read the number, and the same technique can be applied to the letters in a mentally chosen word.

The Watch Steal

This is a popular steal, and one that is described in detail in other works. In essence, you take the spectator by the wrist from above, your thumb pressing against the face of the watch. Your third finger is naturally in position to find the end of the strap, and to walk it up through the buckle. This same finger pinches the same end of the strap, against the second finger if need be, and pulls it up and clear of the pin. Keeping the strap up and back, the fingertip pushes the pin down, and keeps it there. The strap is released and the watch is pulled away in palm position. Who needs pictures?

Like many non-exclusive pick-pockets, I only work with leather straps. One can afford to be opportune. If I only see metal straps, I don't steal any watches. I would, however, refer the enthusiastic novice to the *Watch Steal Video* of Chappy Brazil.

The important issues here are how to start performing the steal with real people, and what misdirection is needed. I find the best idea is to begin by practising on yourself: placing a watch on backwards and learning the basic technique. Next, find a willing guinea-pig (this is a figure of speech which I hope travels across the Atlantic. Fitting a real guinea-pig with a watch and then repeatedly practising the steal can be distressing for the animal and is just plain unkind), preferably one who would like to learn the steal too, and practise on each other.

You will note when it is practised upon you that with the thumb pressing against the face of the watch, the strap is raised from the back of the wrist and the steal is not felt as much as you would imagine. However, the real key to making this work most effectively is confidence (which begets speed) and the occupying of the spectator with some task.

What tasks? The novice brings out his plastic finger-chopper. This disastrous item affords him every reason to grasp the spectator's wrist. Well, that seems to me to be a disadvantage on all sides. Not only are you performing a bad trick for the sake of performing the steal, you are also allowing everyone to backtrack and know when the watch was taken.

The first important point to take on board is that if you are known to be a magician performing at the time, it *does not matter if you mess up the steal*. Watches will always get stuck now and then and you will occasionally be caught. Make the most of the embarrassing moment and ham it up. It is potentially very funny to be caught in the act. Similarly, if you are in a small group when the watch becomes stuck and you feel that you have been discovered although the spectator has been obliging enough to say nothing, then look at it disdainfully

and say, "That's not coming off is it..." The spectator will laugh and his tension at realising your efforts will be released. The rest of the group will be caught off-guard and find it mildly entertaining as well.

It may be odd to recommend making this admission. In a larger group, it is certainly better to play to the audience and steal items without worrying too much if the spectator has felt one or two. A watch or belt that gets stuck is worth persevering with, as long as your victim does not let the audience know that he is aware of what is going on. But in smaller groups, the first question that is always asked of the spectator after a watch is returned is "Did you feel him take it?" If he answers in the affirmative, it is suddenly tremendously disappointing for the entire group. Better to abandon the steal and make a joke of it.

So bearing that in mind, I suggest that the best moments to steal a watch are as follows:

- Taking the spectator by both wrists, the steal can be made while moving him from one seat to another, before you begin an effect. You may wish to sit with one person to perform a piece, and ask the spectator if he wouldn't mind exchanging seats with you.

- Similarly, the steal can be made as you bring a spectator over to participate. You guide him around the table or across to it, or perhaps just stand him up, asking his name and telling him to trust you and so on. (Always tell them to trust you as you steal

from them. It's one of the perks of the job). While performing this or the above steal, it is necessary to press a little harder with the *other* hand against the other wrist while you remove the watch. This is the tactile misdirection: the essence of pick-pocketing.

- Asking for the loan of a ring from a lady as you sit to her left, you take her left wrist with your right hand and place her hand into your left. You then massage her fingers a little as you ask her about one of the rings. As she answers, the steal is made: if she keeps looking at the rings, you may wish to misdirect her to the other hand by reaching across her and taking it with your left hand, allowing her left arm to drop (signalling her to lose interest in it) but keeping hold of it as you steal the timepiece.

- If you must give something to someone to hold, have him hold out his hands, as you sit to his left and guide them into position for him by grasping his wrists. Ask if he is left- or right-handed, and whichever he says, release his right hand and place the object on it and allow the left wrist (with the watch) to drop in the same way as before. Tell him to squeeze the object in his hand. You have plenty of time to make the steal here, and the attention has been on the right hand for some time. However, further cover can be gained by touching him on his right shoulder with your left hand in a cautionary gesture as you tell him to keep his hand absolutely still, or some such instruction. This action should

block his view of your hand on his left wrist as the steal is completed.

The Cigarette through Shirt as Misdirection for Extensive Thievery

When I perform the cigarette-through-shirt, I do so in order to provide light relief from what may have been a series of fairly intense effects. To add to its impact, I relieve the spectator of as many belongings as I can according to a well-planned scheme which I shall describe here. Both the cigarette effect and the steals are performed as light relief – this is a more traditional setting for pick-pocketing, but I describe it here to show how much can be achieved in a short space of time and as an example of working out cover and misdirection.

Imagine performing this classic trick without any altering of the effect or complicating of the presentation, and as a final climax, being able to hand the spectator his wallet, cufflinks, keys, tie, watch and belt! It can all be done smoothly alongside the standard method for the cigarette effect without interfering with the trick.

Here is the routine as I perform it. The thumbtip is in my right jacket pocket.

I finish my preceding effect and allow for a moment of gravity to settle. Usually there is a cigarette already lit to use here, otherwise I would now ask for one to be lit for me. I keep the tone serious. When

I am ready to start, I rub my hands gleefully and say enthusiastically to the gentleman sitting next to me (who has the items about him to steal), "Right! Let's do this!" I stand, and pull him to his feet. The sudden shift in my mood knocks him slightly off-guard, which facilitates the first steal: that of the watch. As I lift him to his feet, I take his wrists and move him to a position where everyone can see him clearly. As I do so, I may say, "Mind that..." nodding in the direction of drinks or imaginary items on the floor, to keep him distracted from the steal that is taking place. I pocket the watch.

Next comes the tie. First I look to see if the knot is biased towards the right or left, and then stand on that side. Generally this will be his left hand side (my right) and the side that the steal must be made. When this is the case I place my right hand on his shoulder near the collar and allow my thumb to slip straight under it and the tie.

"I must ask you to trust me here... I'm not going to embarrass you at all, or do anything unsavoury, but I am going to just untuck the very bottom of your shirt. Is that okay with you?" As I say this, my left hand travels to the bottom end of the tie and holds it for a moment. My right thumb lifts the collar and the thumb and forefinger grab the tie at the side of the neck. Very quickly, I pull out the tie, feeding the thin length back over his shoulder in two bursts. The thin end of the tie should feed up through the knot, but it should not, ideally, pull right through. With this done, I let the collar fall back if I need to, leaving the slack over the back of his neck. The tie still looks fine from the front. When I ask if it is okay to untuck the shirt, I only look at him briefly, then my eyes return to the bottom of his shirt. His answer gives a helpful moment of pause for me to pull at the collar, but I do not want him looking up at me, where my hand movement will be in the periphery of his vision.

I leave the tie in this position, and untuck the shirt. If he hasn't already, I tell him to suck in his stomach. Presuming that the shirt is big enough to provide cover (this works well with a jumper), my left fourth and fifth fingers undo the belt buckle. It is only worth attempting to take the belt if it is reasonably thin and its owner not too corpulent. (We must remember that some people, known as 'shut-ins' become so tragically overweight that they are unable to leave their own homes). The end of the belt will have a tendency to poke out unless it is pulled right through the buckle at this point. The left free fingers poke the end of the strap back into the belt loop of the trousers for the time being, keeping the buckle pin pointing safely the wrong way. The sucking-in of the stomach is always performed by a male spectator, and facilitates automatically the unfastening of the belt. In this contracted position, they do not feel it.

Tie and belt are ready to be stolen, but now we turn our attention to the pocket items. I open the side of his jacket nearest me, which is his left. I ask him to hold it out, and to do the same with the other side. My right hand goes into his outer left pocket and steals anything there while he holds it in position. If his arm is in the way, I simply tell him to hold the jacket higher up. I place the stolen items in my right pocket, and secure the thumbtip. This is all hidden from the spectators by the flap of the jacket.

I then proceed with the effect. So far, I have done nothing more than stand a spectator in position, untuck his shirt-front, and ask him to hold his jacket open. Even if I were not pick-pocketing, I would have appeared to have done the same. Each move necessary for the extensive steals is well-hidden amongst the actions necessary for the cigarette effect. The steals simply exploit them.

The remaining moves will happen in the moments of relaxation, amazement and mirth following the climax of the cigarette vanish. It is therefore vital that the trick is performed and acted convincingly, to provide the necessary tension that will afford a good psychologically invisible moment after it has finished.

After the cigarette has vanished, the left hand remains under the shirt, and the right retains the tip. "Oops, I have made a little burn," I say, and as the spectator looks down, I dump the prosthetic demi-digit into my pocket. Trying to complete the steals with it on would create the same feeling of tactile detachment associated with rubber sheaths of any kind. The group will be on tenterhooks, wondering where the cigarette has gone. I lower the shirt-flap over the buckle of the belt, which I have managed to flatten. The belt must be taken last, because it is the only steal that may be felt at the last minute. I move around to his other side, as he drops his jacket and looks for the cigarette. I innocently say, "I didn't get any ash on you, did I?" In so saying, I casually open his right jacket side to show the shirt more clearly (as if we are both looking for any signs of the cigarette) and steal from that outside pocket.

I am now ready to show the stolen pocket items. The return of goods must be maximised to the greatest effect. The more you can show, the better. I give him back something from the first pocket-steal, and apologise for somehow having it in my possession. Then any other items are returned. As I give them back, I name various other pockets from where I pretend to have stolen them. Thus they believe that I had stolen from trouser pockets, and inside pockets too. I have them replace them items in the pockets I say, but I supposedly return one to the inner right pocket myself. Rather than actually place the item there, I use an idea of James Freedman's and merely mime the placement, pulling the jacket only a little way from the body and

pulling down on the pocket with my forefinger. To the spectator, it feels as if the item has been replaced. However, I then release the item altogether and catch it at the base of the jacket with my left hand which awaits it. Therefore I can return it again, after a few more items have been replaced. "You want to put that away more carefully," I say, giving it back, allowing him to think that he had replaced it himself. A subtle but effective point.

After the pocket items, I will take cufflinks if they are worn. I go to the spectator's right arm, and lift it at the wrist, pulling the sleeve back just a little and saying, "Didn't you have a very expensive watch on?" Because I am holding the *right* arm, he will immediately go to his left, which is actually where he wore it. It seems as if I have just lifted the wrong arm, or that he himself is not sure on which wrist he wore it. My right hand steadies the cuff while my left fingers open the T-bar and pull it swiftly through. His attention is now on the other arm where the watch should be. I feign amazement and reach across to take the wrist that is missing the watch. "Has it gone?" I ask. "Can you remember what it looked like?" Because I am still towards his right side, he naturally looks away from the wrist to answer my question. I push the remaining cufflink through and pocket them as I reach into my pocket and remove the watch.

Throughout this nonsense, the group will be laughing and enjoying the predicament of their friend and my skills. It is important that I take an almost apologetic tone with this type of routine and keep him from feeling too humiliated by the happenings. The return of the watch, however, should get me a round of applause. I build it up a little, and withdraw it slowly from the pocket. I move around to his left side as I display it to the group and to him, and as I give it back I give him a consoling squeeze on the shoulder and relax. This provides a good 'off-beat' to place my hand on his chest across the

tie for a second and pull the very end of the material through the knot. The tie knot should remain in place, but the loose end simply hangs down his back.

Now to finish. The returning of the items is apparently over, I thank the group and the spectator, and invite him to sit back down. My right arm comes across his chest to his right shoulder, pushing him back gently, as I ask where he was sat. At the same time, my left hand grabs the belt end, and pulls it out of the loop where it has been resting, then grabs the buckle. I turn around with the belt buckle in my hand, snaking the belt out of his trousers and around my body in a figure-eight movement. This is seen by the group and is definitely played for laughs. I am now on his right side, holding up the belt. I apologise profusely, and place it with my right hand across his body into his left. In the action of doing so, I block his downwards view with my right arm, and my left simultaneously comes in, grabs the tie near the knot, and pulls it towards me, over and free of his shoulder. I push it into my left pocket, blocked from the view of the spectators by my body, as I thank him for being a marvellous sport and invite him to sit. I take my applause, although this is something of a false ending, and at the right moment I go for the overkill and produce the tie. If the knot is still in place, I sometimes hold the thin end behind the knot and grip the whole thing there as if were still tied. I pretend to unfasten it as I hand it back. That sparks off some very bewildered conversations later.

A lot, you'll agree, to get out of a thumbtip.

Unnerving Reveals

The previous routine, as I was kind enough to point out, is designed as an entertaining piece of hilarity. Clearly, most of the time, the spectator won't have a tie, cufflinks, jacket *and* belt: I describe the full, potential routine with maximum number of steals. It does not, however, resonate that unnerving power that we would wish for it to stand as a proud example of Real Magic realised.

This is where I would like to expand the point that a steal does not have to be played for laughs. Presuming that we have already wandered from the traditional path and *not* allowed the audience to see that an item has been stolen, we have the possibility of revealing the steal in a more serious and unsettling way than with the line "Is this your wallet, Sir?"

If you have stolen a valuable and personal item from a person, you have performed a very disturbing act. Because you are known to be a magician, you will not land yourself in trouble or genuinely upset anybody when you reveal what you have done. Therefore we are in a situation where rather than merely playing for amusement, we can orchestrate disturbing and unsettling magic without causing any upset.

It has been a theme of this book that magic is purely what you communicate it to be. You can presume that it is serious and powerful and act accordingly, which is the priority that concerns us here. The same must now apply to the return of a stolen item. Producing a person's wallet will generate in them a moment of confusion. As with any moment of magic, the bewildered spectator

experiences a rush of conflicts, which need some resolution. The context that you provide for them will give them the answers they need. If you sell your magic as entirely safe and not at all worrying, then they will not find that moment disturbing in the least. If, however, your character as a performer encourages them to perceive a gentle note of threat in what you do, then they as they search for answers in those moments of confusion, they will look in darker and more emotive areas and find any resolution less comfortable. This is surely preferable.

So you can resist the urge to make a joke out of producing a watch or wallet from your pocket and handing it back. For example, in the classic watch reveal, our 'safe' magician might ask, "Do you have the time?" The spectator would look at his wrist, and experience confusion. Then it would dawn in him that the magician had stolen his watch. In that realisation, the question posed by the magician makes sense, and the realisation that the watch had been stolen is *the moment of relief*. The magician produces the watch to laughter and delight. Rather then creating tension, the production of the watch arrives after it has been released. It is almost incidental.

Much of the time, this is fine for our purposes, but it is not what we really want here. Consider this alternative handling. You have stolen the watch, and have it casually held unseen in your left hand. You are sat some distance from the spectator. You are having a conversation about aspects of the magic and mind-reading, and are allowing your tone to become serious and gently imposing rather than light-hearted. By maintaining eye-contact and lowering your voice, you allow your words to develop a hypnotic quality. Your body language and non-verbal communication suggest complete seriousness on your part, and the spectator is drawn into that. You continue talking, and say, "I would demonstrate more of what I

mean, but I do not have the time now. You've sat there listening to me for a while, haven't you? What is the..." You stop and suddenly *surge* in your seat. You close your eyes and inhale deeply, clenching your left fist around the watch and bringing it up in front of you. "... time, anyway?" you continue as a if nothing had happened, and open your hand, looking down at it a little bemused. The spectator sees the watch. For a moment, he does not recognise it. Then he does, and jumps. (And they do when you do it this way). He looks at his wrist, and sure enough, his watch has gone. This time, the sight of the watch does not provide the resolution, it provides a suddenly deeply unnerving experience. There is no watch still to produce, so no resolution is being offered. In the classic presentation, the neat solution "oh, he must have stolen it, wow, I didn't feel that..." is arrived at very quickly, and there is some sort of emotional closure for the spectator. In our presentation here, there is an instantaneous, bizarre and unsettling moment when the watch appears to have been transported. If the spectator does not believe that the watch *really* went at that moment, your statement "you've been listening to me for some time, haven't you?" delivered in your hypnotic tone, will suggest the back-up solution that it was stolen during that strange, mesmerising conversation. This way you do not provide the comfort of the initial presentation, with its safe and relatively pedestrian ending.

After the watch is seen, I look at the time, and say "I must be going. It was an immense pleasure," or some such words, and leave the watch in the centre of the table. I do not hand it back, which would, very subtly, move the experience towards that closure that I want to avoid. Instead, the spectator has to deal with the confusion and then reach over and pick it up himself, by which point I have gone.

I hope that you can see the difference between the two presentations. Inasmuch as we are looking for ways of making magic more powerful, these shifts in approach do combine to create a very different experience for the audience.

Often, when performing the cigarette-through-shirt, there will only be a tie to steal. The steal is prepared before the effect as described above, and completed in the exploited moments of intrigue and wonder that come after the cigarette is seen to have vanished. Very often, if I have blocked the rest of the group's view of the preparation for the steal, no one will be aware that the tie has gone. If possible, I wait a long time before revealing it. I may leave the group, return to them late and perform one or two other effects, but not going too near the same chap. Then I will engross him in conversation in a similar way that I have described before, and at the very end surge in the same odd way and snap the tie into view, each end wrapped menacingly around a fist in strangling position one.

Again, the time misdirection makes these steals very powerful, but I have to be aware of the risk that the spectators may notice the absence of their possessions before I wish them too. This is particularly problematic if I leave them alone for a while before returning. However, the benefits are worth the risk, for no one will believe that he had been sitting for an hour without his tie. If he does realise and I do get asked, it is of course always in a good-natured way, and this is the time to allow it to be seen as a joke. I ask for a description of the item, and then bring out a whole load of things from my pockets that look as if I have been stealing from everybody. I fish his item out and ask if it's the right one, then offer him any of the others too.

Of course this way, word spreads quickly that you are a pick-pocket, which makes further steals more difficult. But that is the problem with performing pick-pocketing while mingling, and little can be done about it.

I hope that I have come to interest the magical performer who has never looked into the possibility of performing pick-pocketing. It is very effective at enhancing your character as a performer and the level at which you interact with your audience. If you perform it in the normal way, you are setting out your skills as a performer and therefore establishing the charmingly devious aspects of your character – and that character will enhance the dramatic impact of the conflicts that you set up for yourself or are imposed upon you. And the particular skill is one that is normally at the forefront of your audience's imagination: how many times have we had spectators jokingly grab for their watches and wallets after shaking hands with us? It is a treat to then actually provide that for them, and it is without doubt an immensely entertaining skill.

Pick-pocketing provides an excellent lesson in spectator-handling, confidence and control, as well as the kick of adopting a charming veneer while simultaneously fleecing someone. Where I once performed it enthusiastically and openly, I now use it only to add spice to those magical cadenzas that vary the pace and textures of my performances, and have given it a darker feel for my more serious act. And there is nothing, *nothing* like taking abuse from an arrogant, insulting spectator who resents the shift of focus from himself to you… and knowing that when he has finished you have his wallet and watch to calmly and politely return. That is beautiful, natural dramatic resolution which has a message of "Don't mess with me."

Recreation and Repetition

Probably every professional close-up worker has had the experience of mingling at a busy event and performing the one effect, over and over again, all evening and for every group. Nothing wrong with that: if there is only time to show one effect to each group, one may as well choose the strongest and most appropriate material one has.

Even if the situation is not that extreme, it is certainly the case that whatever we are performing, we have done so many, many times before. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of times. How many times have I closed with the sponge bunnies or three lengths of cocking rope? Too many countless times to tell. This is the situation for most performers of any kind in most areas, but for the close-up worker it is particularly applicable: he might perform his act dozens of times in an evening. Yet each time that ring vanishes, or each time he unfolds his genitals onto the table to reveal the card misspelt in ballpoint-pen across the length of his member, *each time* it must appear to be as fresh and as new as a the first dew-sodden daisy to awaken and stretch on a Monday morning in a meadow in Spring quite far back from the road.

The answer is to *think* fresh. When you begin the effect, you must talk and act in a way that utterly involves the spectators, not in a way that feels to them as if they are being talked *at*. You must believe in the effect as you do it.

I have seen many magicians come out and launch into their routine, a string of quips and moves that leave the audience far behind.

Everything the performer says feels like a line, and all the lines are usually bad. It is patter of the worst kind. Lines, one after another. We, the audience, retreat and disengage.

You should not be launching anything until you have the spectators on board. Otherwise they will be standing on the docks, half-heartedly waving goodbye as the routine drifts off into a lonely, expansive ocean. No one has come with you, because no one was invited. Nobody was ushered and welcomed aboard, and no one got to come and see the beautiful sights of the shimmering blue sea.

Do you repeat the effect each time that you do it? Or do you recreate it from scratch, brand new and sparkling, each time you start? You can recreate it each time *in the same way*, without it being a tired repetition. And the best way to do this is to make sure that your spectators are actually involved in each stage of the effect. In a close-up setting, a routine such as the Oil and Water does not incorporate much in the way of participation. So care must be taken to engage the audience with your personality to the extent that they are happy to, essentially, sit and watch for a moment while you show something. In a platform piece that does not involve a spectator joining you, there is a real danger of that lonely cruise-for-one. Producing Aces and Making Things happen With Some Cards will bore your audience senseless unless your character is so likeable and engaging that you are bringing this indifferent material to life. If you, on the other hand, are thinking that the *material itself* is the part that will win them over, then, well, you get to see all those sights on your own.

Where you can engage a spectator in the process, do. Within the restrictions imposed by pacing, as well as practical and aesthetic considerations, this is generally a good rule of thumb. Engaging a

spectator does not mean asking her to hold her hand out. That does not mean that she feels involved. If you think that spectator involvement is about telling them to put their hand here or there, or think of this or that, *you are wrong, wrong, wrong*. Those things may be involved, but your task is to engage, first and foremost, their *imaginations*. To bring them in and engage them so deeply, that when they do hold out their hand or take a card, they feel a real sense of anticipation and suspense.

How do you achieve this? You realise that the spectators are where the magic happens, not in your hands. You treat them like real people, who will have their cynicisms and doubts, but who can also be seduced into a more responsive state. You ensure that when you are considering effects, that it is the image of spectators leaning forward and being emotionally very present and very involved that gives you the sense of satisfaction, not just your delight of a cunning method. Cunning methods may often inspire great magic, but then the source of the delight has travelled to better places and the performer has gone on to look at far more potent considerations.

If you do not completely understand this: not as an intellectual idea but as a clear and reverberating belief, then you are not performing satisfying magic. If you do not start looking at how the best magicians engage their audiences instead of how they achieve their effects, you are not moving forward as a magician. If you do not realise, to paraphrase Eugene Burger, that a small handful of tricks can suffice for the rest of your life but that it is *how you connect them to your audience* that is important, then you should probably, in all fairness, restrict your performances to the amateur level.

If you do understand this maxim, and you resonate it as you seduce your audiences in whatever manner fits your style, then you will

have the necessary tool to facilitate the *recreation*, as opposed to the repetition of the effect as you begin. If you are *thinking* fresh, and if you have involved your audience and got to know them a little, and you are ensuring that they are utterly involved and intrigued by the possibility of what you may do, then you will not be 'launching,' yet again, into the same old routine. You will be excited yourself to give them a certain experience that you know will move them, unnerve them or delight them in some way.

You can deny yourself this enjoyment, and just slog out tricks every time you perform. You can spoil what I am convinced, after ten years or so, is the best job in the world (or second only to the Checker Of Cameron Diaz's Breasts), by reducing it to *dance, magic Monkey, dance!* You can choose to settle for the weary familiarity of the jaded veteran or the bouncy enthusiasm of naivety, both of which stop you from really considering what could happen when you sit down with a group, armed with the talent for creating wonder and thought that you have.

You could deny yourself all of this, and just do tricks at people, but I don't think for a moment that you should impose that limitation upon an audience who have every right to expect far more.

Acting Technique - Remembering to Forget

Fine acting is a joy to watch. When I see such talent on stage or in a film, I find that I feel safe enough to lose myself in that character. I know that nothing will suddenly jar or leave me unconvinced. This feeling of safety to lose oneself is a kind preparedness to be vulnerable, and this means that we placing our trust in that actor. To have him suddenly do his job badly and lose us half way through the story would be a terrible betrayal on his part.

I enjoy the company of actor friends. Whereas drama-students are invariably repellent, I find that mature and committed actors generally offer the most rewarding and insightful company I could ever hope for. One of those marvellous people is Peter Clifford, a very fine established actor and one of the best magical performers I know.

I talk with Peter a lot about acting. During a recent conversation, that rolled on late into the night over bad whisky (his, not mine) and tea, I was intrigued to hear my friend say that when he walks out on stage, he does not know what any of his lines are. After so rigorously committing them to memory before and during the rehearsal process, he must then allow himself to forget them. Forget, that is, at a conscious level. He never misses a line. But when he walks out on stage, he *does not know what he's going to say until the words come out of his mouth*. Everything is being said for the first time. Returning to our

earlier theme of recreation and repetition, Peter's performances are being recreated each time he begins, and never repeated.

Peter walks out there and *is* the part. Only on bad nights does he have to start 'acting.' If the audience is unresponsive and the mood bad, he may start to feel insecure and try and give more to his performance, which involves suddenly conscious acting. At that moment, the performance becomes a veneer, and it is at those times that the script suddenly pops back into his mind's eye. An awareness of his lines constitutes an inelegant and detrimental scenario for the actor.

I have no doubt that some actors of similarly high calibre may not find sympathy with this experience. But I listened to Peter's description of the process, and thought of the relationship that a magician – that peculiar type of actor – has to his script. The experience flashed through my mind of a performance I had seen in the close-up section of a local convention, and one that is typical of many. This was the young and technically gifted bright star of the area's club, performing card tricks perfectly well but killing them dead by reciting a stream of patter lines *at* us. There was no spontaneity, no charm, no likeability and no connection made with anybody. He had not yet found his character, and was merely aping the generic model of the magician, which is so seductive to the enthusiast. I very much look forward to him developing the self-awareness necessary to find his performance character from within himself and not those around him.

He had a script in mind, whether or not it had ever been written down, and was reciting it at us. We sat there and heard lines. When a performer does that, the words seem to emanate from the mouth only. When, by comparison, we watch a talented actor, the words

resonate from a deeper place. There is an inseparable sense in which this is literally true, for few magicians take the trouble to learn about voice production. When we talk about someone talking 'from the heart,' we are describing words that emanate from the depths of someone, and which convince us of their sincerity. The actor and the equipped performer of any kind, producing a freer and more resonant voice from deeper within himself, will more readily communicate that sense of sincerity than the tinny, forced voice of the magician straining to be heard over noise. But even without investigating voice and speech techniques, the lines spoken as lines that come from the performer's conscious memory through the mask and out of the mouth bypass any point of resonance and do not connect with us at this basic level. By contrast, the performer who has allowed himself to forget about technique and patter (having first absorbed these things through years of developing them) and simply and honestly *is* for the duration of the act the character that he portrays, will resonate conviction quite naturally.

It surprises me that a magician who is still performing at the level of saying words at his audience does not simply hear that it's going wrong. When technically funny lines do not reliably get a big laugh, then I would imagine a clear signal has been sounded that something is not working. The inexperienced performer probably blames the line, if he indeed notices that stony silence at all. He misses, sadly, the fact that if he had the audience firmly engaged in his personality, they would probably find any funny lines quite hysterical. This bizarre blindness and deafness to feedback is remarkably common amongst performers – but I suppose that when all else fails, a straightforward refusal to face reality can be an immense comfort. In Nevil Maskelyne's words,

> "the possession of an intellect so obtuse, and a hide so pachydermatous, must confer upon the possessor a degree of self-satisfaction unknown to men of real ability."

I can only imagine that the performer in question is still working from the standpoint of 'doing tricks at people' and is thus locked in his own world of technique during performance. If you are enjoying or thinking about the secret methods as you perform, or if it is the delight of those factors that attract you to an effect, then realise that you are on your own when you do them. The whole point of a secret method is that no one else gets to appreciate it. Wave goodbye to everyone at the dock and start doing your trick to yourself as you sail out of earshot into the vast blue.

As actors playing the part of magicians, we may have to communicate a number of emotions, depending upon our character and his relationship to the material. Some of the following emotional states and objects of make-believe are usually part of our repertoire:

- Awe and wonder at the magical climax.
- Surprise at the orchestrated unexpected happening.
- Power, perhaps with a sinister edge.
- Confusion or loss of control, when something has appeared to go disastrously wrong.
- Concentration and mental effort.
- The ability to see deeply into the psyche of the spectator.

In the nineteenth century, the young Stanislavski wrote that he was impressed with the natural and easy performances of foreign artists visiting the contemporary Moscow theatre. He compared these with the exaggerated, declamatory technique of the Russian tradition of which he was still a part. In his *My Life In Art* (a great title that I will steal one day for my own autobiography), he says that these new, western actors *created*, whereas he was only able to imitate what others had done before. This man, who was to become the dominant influence on actor training today and the creator of the 'System' of modern, realist acting (which in turn inspired the Method approach with which we are familiar), was faced with the sharply contrasted difference between acting that flowed easily from the heart and the forced presentation of a cliché, which was the standard fare.

Clearly as magicians we are not faced with the same strenuous demands on our acting abilities as the actor who prepares for *The Cherry Orchard, Uncle Vanya* or *Cats*. Yet it is clear that most magic is presented unconvincingly, and does not emanate from anywhere deeper than the fingers, so it is worth the effort of developing an awareness of these issues, and learning to develop the best habits. So much of this book is based upon the conviction that when the magic begins *inside* us as performers, and resonates through our personalities as well as our effects, we will communicate far more, and more magically than the performer who is no more than the sum of his tricks. Gogol, Stanislavski's ally, writes that the actor

> "ought to consider the purpose of his role, the major and predominant concern of [his] character, what it is that consumes his life and constitutes the perpetual object of his thoughts, his *idée fixe*. Having grasped this major concern, the

> actor must assimilate it so thoroughly that the thoughts and yearnings of his character seem to be his own and remain constantly in his mind over the course of the performance... So, one should first grasp the soul of a part not its dress."
>
> *Nikolay Gogol*, pp. 169-70

How many magicians grasp the soul of their performance character before paying attention to their costume and props? Writing to Schepkin in 1846, Gogol said:

> "Root out caricature entirely and lead them to understand that an actor must not *present* but *transmit*."

Presenting magic rather than transmitting it recalls our unhappy idea of *doing tricks at people*. The vast majority of magicians are happy merely to present magic. Most of those will only *transmit* to their variably detached audiences that they have a hobby, and their magic will be looked on as, at best, *clever*.

Perhaps the most strikingly appropriate part of Stanislavski's System as regards our art is the 'magic *If*.' Imagine for a moment how you might convey any of the emotional states listed earlier. How might you 'act' confused, surprised, or brimming with wonder? Certain facial expressions and voice patterns may come to mind. Now imagine if an actor, who in the middle of an entirely convincing play or film needed to convey fear, just 'acted' scared in the most mundane sense of the word. He trembled his lips, cowered and bit at his nails. We would recognise the communication as one of fear, but we would not for a moment believe it. There is the clichéd image of fear, abstracted from the situation at hand, and there is the fear felt by *that* character, who sees the implications of *his situation*.

I was struck with the impact that this difference makes a few weeks ago. Bristol, where I make my home, is near to the beautiful Georgian city of Bath, whose stonework and delightful streetage rival only the Tudor charm of Stratford or Swindon. Any visitor to Bath is recommended to take in the 'Bizarre Bath' walk, a superior blend of magic, comedy and misleading local history performed by JJ and Noel Britten, two very established British performers. I shall attempt to make my point here without giving away one of the surprise highlights of the walk. Noel was leading the walk on the night I attended, and it happens during the course of the evening's entertainment that an item, borrowed from the audience, is 'accidentally' lost. Not vanished, but terribly and irrevocably lost.

To convincingly communicate the flurry of panicky emotions which such a disaster would provoke is a task that many magicians attempt and fail to achieve. This is because they try, if anything, to 'act' panic and present a cliché, detached form the event like our bad actor suddenly cowering in fear like a cartoon character. Noel employed Stanislavski's magic *If*. This means that rather than act the emotion, the skilled actor behaves *as if* the situation were true - asking what would happen *if* the situation had occurred to his character. This tricks the imagination into taking the route of convincing realism. Consider the different ways that you respond to these questions:

- How do I look panicky?
- What would I do if I had really lost this valuable item? What would that mean?

As it was, Noel stared and stared at his 'mistake' as we all took in the implications of the accident. He, too, was dealing with the implications through unconscious use of this procedure. For a while, he looked... then he tried to revert to character and make a few gags, which got uneasy laughs... he tried to appear comfortable and regain professional composure but was unable to look away from what he had done. He even laughed.

Now, you may protest that spectators never believe that the borrowed item has *really* been lost. Invariably when something genuinely terrible happens, such as a borrowed ring missing its target and rolling beautifully across the crowded dance-floor, the performer is never believed when he tries to explain that something really *has* gone wrong. But there are different levels of belief, and these things rely on the signals given by the performer. When Noel's catastrophe happens, we are also thrown for a moment, and look to him for the tiny cues and clues that will guide us to belief or disbelief. Like the behaviour needed to convince the audience that the moment of magic is beautiful or unnerving rather than just confusion, the performer who must convey genuine panic is there guiding a moment of bewilderment and insecurity felt by the group into the dramatically rewarding area of conviction that a mishap has happened. Getting this right seduces the audience into a closer emotional relationship with the performer. Tamariz has also spoken much about convincingly conveying moments of apparent mishap.

Yet it is necessary to forget these things. The place for conscious consideration of these issues is for our rehearsal space. In performance, we must have these psychological abilities so firmly in place that they become second nature. In that way, the new becomes organically our own, and we are unaware of technique. These things must become natural and familiar responses. If this seems difficult

and unfamiliar territory, create in your mind a scenario or memory that makes you feel the desired emotion – amplify it and represent it in a bright, vivid way to yourself – and notice how the feeling creeps up on you, how it moves through you, what it feels like in you. Let yourself remember the feeling clearly and practise bringing it back. Know how you feel, and then allow that to be triggered by the requisite moment in your performance. These sorts of exercises will allow you to see that you can bring into play any emotion of which you have some experience, whenever you want, simply by calling that state to mind through a vivid recollection of the circumstances that triggered it. Then you can forget about acting a cliché, present something that resonates honesty, and think and feel along the lines of 'what would I do *if* this were really happening…?'

The result of this approach will be magic that is *felt* by you, and therefore powerfully transmitted and recreated, not coldly presented and repeated. The only reason to do this, other than to make it more rewarding for you, is to make your magic far, far stronger.

Part Three:

New Perceptions

Creativity in Isolation

"Antes só que mal acompanhado."
"Better alone than in bad company" – Portuguese proverb.

A couple of years ago I was booked to perform for a birthday party held in a restaurant. It was a large group of friends in their twenties and early thirties, and they were all very responsive to my magic. They were a nice bunch of people to work for, enthusiastic in their responses and physically attractive.

I was surprised some six months later to find myself next to three of them at a regional magic convention. It seems that this core triad of friends had developed a real interest in magic following my dazzling appearance that night. Which, for Heaven's sake, only makes sense. Chatting to them provided some distraction from the turgid parade of stage 'acts' which, as ever, constituted a series of charmless people in tails showing us, to the accompaniment of Vangelis, some props which they had bought.

Six months after that I got a phone call from one of the three, asking to meet. Their interest in magic had continued to flourish, and they wanted a few pointers. As time went on, we all became friends, and the three started to work professionally as a group, a trio of magicians that work the grungy club and festival circuit. And they do so brilliantly.

They have only been performing for a year or so, and will be the first to say that they still have many enjoyable years ahead of them to develop and build on what they are learning now, technically and dramatically. But these three go out and perform far, far better than the majority of working magicians that I have seen who have had ten years to refine their performance.

Let me describe them. They wear T-shirts and jeans, obviously heavily influenced by the image and engrossing personality of David Blaine. One is covered – literally – in tattoos and has a shaved head. He teaches Tai-Chi and carries with him the sweet aroma of top-grade home-grown marijuana. The second is absurdly tall and has an air about him of a carnival attraction from the Victorian period. The third is a fast-talking, ducking-and-diving cheeky dodgy cockney chappie whom you like enormously within minutes but wouldn't ask to guard your car for a moment while you nip into the shop.

These three work in the most difficult of surroundings and are exactly the right type of people to do so. They constantly practise and when I hear their ideas for presentations, I am drawn to their originality and complete dedication to presenting plausible, unnerving magic. When the tattooed member of the group performs, he brings his knowledge of Tai-Chi into his work, downplaying, for example, the use of an ITR as a demonstration of 'palm-breathing': allowing a bottle cap to rise and fall rhythmically in his hand. When he performs the Balducci levitation, he first invokes the Sun gods. Quite seriously. People buy into it, and it gives him a means of positioning himself correctly for the effect. Alternatively, they levitate each other across the room using a concealed signal device.

These are three performers who have a modest and strikingly mature attitude to their magic. They absorb ideas like sponges, and understand their niche and particular appeal. Above all, they have an originality in their presentation which has come from pursuing the aesthetic which they had in mind for themselves. They are aware of their characters as performers. They know only too well about the importance of making their magic meaningful for their audiences, for they are working with potentially very unforgiving and restless crowds.

They have learnt from actually performing, and from sitting with each other every day and playing with moves and ideas. They have *not* learnt from attending lectures and magic clubs. The result is that they present magic that is *magical* and persuasive, for it would not occur to them to do anything else. It would not, for example, occur to them to fill their presentations with one-liners. Neither would they use the patter and personality of their favourite performers. They would not perform effects that were out of line with their respective characters.

When I compare them to the bulk of magicians who perform in one capacity or another, it is clear that these three guys are far more imaginative than the bulk of what the magical fraternity puts out. Working together, they have quickly come to understand the importance of simple performance-related and magical basics that seem to be missed by the performers who are supposedly being guided and taught by clubs, or who are apparently gleaning knowledge and improvement from lectures and conventions.

It is easy to make that criticism without first seeing that to enjoy magic as a hobby is a perfectly noble thing, and that clubs are generally set up for hobbyists. But as Tommy Wonder says, if you

are a hobbyist, you probably shouldn't go out and perform. Performing our art, especially for an audience of non-magicians, demands the highest standards and a knowledge and fluency with the stuff of performance. It is very different from showing tricks to friends and fellow enthusiasts, which is a fine thing but belongs to a different arena. Yet this creates a vicious circle. The hobbyists who make up most audiences at conventions and clubs are interested in picking up new tricks, not learning about performance. They feel that they have a right to know all the methods and secrets of an established professional simply because he is being paid to lecture, but are generally less interested in the real glue that binds those secrets together: the performance itself.

Good, professional performers who take their magic seriously will create effects borne from an understanding of themselves as characters, for it is this that begets their personality in performance. This means that for many performers, myself included, some effects are immensely *personal*. Having someone else perform your material badly can be like watching a neighbour sodomize your pets. And I know what that's like.

Unfortunately, there is not a glimmer of understanding of this truth from the amateur community at large. Imagine that instead of being magicians, we were stand-up comedians. Amateur, semi-professional and full-time pros, we would go out and bring the magic of laughter to audiences. We would learn material, we would develop and practise it, shaping it to have the most powerful impact. We would develop our own characters, and create material to suit ourselves. Then once a year, we would hold conventions. Comedians would gather from around the world to enjoy each other's company, meet the famous, and improve somehow as performers. Talks would

be given, questions answered by star performers, and the whole thing would end with a gala show.

Clearly, at those talks, the enthusiasts would hear about delivery, developing material, timing, character-creation and how to make it in a difficult business. The enthusiasts would be inspired by the experiences of the people they respect and would use their example to move further down their own paths with more understanding. Can you seriously imagine that those talks would ever consist of top performers, respected by their audiences, standing and dictating their jokes one at a time while people wrote them down? That each performer would be expected to simply recite a long list of gags and invite the audience to go out and start using his lines the next day?

Can you see how pointless that would be? And how terrible for the lecturing performer who is expected to remove the very stuff of comedy from his performance and reduce it to a list of jokes? Now, for those that cannot attend, there are videos available. These are not the videos that stand-up comedians actually enjoy at the moment, where they can see their idols in performance, working the crowd and getting the most out of their material: no, these would be in-house videos for comedians which, again, consist of those same top performers listing jokes. You would watch the tapes, write down the ones you like (an on-screen labelling system even allows you to cue back and forth to particular favourites) and go out and use them.

If we follow this image through, we can see how comedians would become utterly interchangeable and lose the skills that make them funny. All over the world they would tell the same jokes. All over the world audiences would laugh politely. The comedians would not worry about *performing* those jokes, they would just tell them, believing that the joke itself would be enough to be comedy.

Comedy, as a performance genre, would be seen as identical to what happens when someone tells a joke after dinner. The top, professional comedians who were still genuinely artful at what they do, would have to deal with the fact that their very profession was brought into disrepute by a world of friends telling jokes badly to one another. Worse, those friends telling jokes would be the ones listening to the lectures, noting down the jokes given to them by the top professionals who can only watch that circle bring the whole industry downhill.

I love watching good comedy and am pleased that it has not given rise to quite the same type of scene that we have in magic. I am pleased that *comedians* have real respect for each other's art. It is a very good thing that comedians frown upon plagiarising material from each other. I like the fact that while, like most performance genres, it attracts at the amateur level a quota of enthusiastic but bad would-be performers, the comedy industry does not cater *primarily* for that percentile.

The result of this sad approach in magic is that everyone in the magic fraternity apart from the novice enthusiast has an area of disillusionment within him when considering the 'scene.' Lecturers know that the important points regarding performance are not what their trick-hungry, over-saturated audiences want, although it is absolutely what they should hear. So they turn their lectures into dealer-demonstrations, or choose to perform their second-rate material which they are happy to explain.

By far the best lecture I have attended was given by Tamariz on the correct placement and use of comedy in magic. He taught me things that I did not know in a way that made sense and was utterly

memorable. No tricks were taught. How rarely do we learn things at conventions that are actually important to us as performers?

I fully realise that the novice performer has to ape his idols for a while to find his ground, and in order to learn the moves and ideas that will form the working basis of his own future effects will probably have to take material from other performers for a while. But such performers as Guy Hollingworth and Lennart Green, favourites of the community, learnt their original approaches with little recourse to the teachings of others: they sat and played with cards in comparative isolation and arrived at their own destinations, ones that appear to suit them marvellously. The three lads I described, though influenced at first by the Blaine repertoire, followed their own presentational ideas and now perform, in the main, very original magic.

The magic community does not promote creativity. People may enjoy the fraternity for various reasons, but a personal drive to create original performance art is not one of them. Magic is a wonderful hobby, and the opportunity to share it with fellow enthusiasts is a good thing, bringing people together and keeping them safely off the streets and away from children. But it is a rare magic club that is prepared to really teach its members about performance, and magic is not *magic* without performance.

In isolation, we can learn to develop the creative process for ourselves. Those performing magicians who say that they are simply not creative talk nonsense: if they can perform well enough, they can begin to think along theatrical and aesthetic terms. The trick is to change your approach from a passive one into an active one.

Passivity and laziness amongst magicians are everywhere. The more we learn from videos and lift routines out of books, the lazier we become. The creative, active approach is different: we decide on an effect which would be marvellous to achieve and then give ourselves the space to find the solution. We learn through play, perhaps by focussing attention on a deck of cards for a few hours a day, finding interesting new ideas there. Be careful, though, with the latter approach: for finding a method before an effect often produces magic far more satisfying to perform than watch. But whatever we achieve on our own in this way will be *individual to us*: it will have stamped upon it the hallmark of our personality. The more we tread this path and refine our creations, seeing them entirely from the audience's angle, the more our magic will resonate an individual approach worth experiencing.

There is nothing like the moment of discovering the solution to a creative problem. For me, it is normally one of discovering a presentational structure or approach that will enhance and give meaning to a magical idea. When I find the answer that works for me, I am elated. I do not even ask for friends to suggest those answers, because I would hate to deny myself that moment, or be seduced by someone else's vision. Since pretty much abandoning the performance of anyone else's effects, I have come to enjoy magic in a very different way: and everything I now perform is, in my mind, as good as magic can be. The only way any magician can really feel this, and believe in his worth, is by designing and performing his own routines to his own highest standard. For those who are unfamiliar with this aspect of the magician's life, it is a truly splendid one. Bristol offers some charming countryside through which to stroll alone and dream up solutions to beautiful, magical pictures. It means that when I do go out and perform, I am putting these ideas into practice, and refining them as much as I feel is

possible. That makes each performance an excellent opportunity, and far more interesting to me than when I was just presenting a string of dealer items.

It does not take long to gain a grasp of the basics of magic, and most importantly, to gain the magical, deceptive mind-set that you need to think up ideas. As soon as those are in place, it should be time to start to follow your own vision of what magic should be. What are you looking for when you buy those dealer items? What strikes you as a good type of effect? What binds all those good effects together for you? Why do you ignore certain others? How could they be better, even the ones that are already your favourites?

If you can begin to identify the qualities that you see as most important in a magical effect, you will begin to get a sense of your own approach to the art. Next, you can begin to dream up ideas for effects along similar lines. Create wild and impossible ideas, but ones that are clear and simple in their wondrous impossibility. Then start to think of answers, and play with the ideas without compromising them. Work from the top-down, not bottom-up: i.e., start with the big picture and work down, leaving the intricacies of the sleights for last, for they are really the least important aspect of the whole. If you find yourself working in the wrong direction, from the individual moves upwards, return to the larger pictures and the grander ideas. Allow yourself to think for the moment in terms of lasers, twins and impossible rigs of machinery: think big, and after a while you will hit a moment of absolute inspiration.

This demands of you the very opposite of the dynamic of the magic club. Thinking in this grand way is not about sharing ideas, nor is it about settling for the standards of the amateur. It is about a personal quest, and a passionate search for an ideal, and is the stuff that

magic is made of. If you are a hobbyist, think bigger than just *hobby*. I would hate you to become one of those embarrassing Uncles at Christmas. Begin the creative changes in the approach to your performance, and give yourself the respect and the effects the weight that they deserve. Start to see the material of other performers that you watch in lectures or on videos as *their* material, and although you may have the *right* to perform what they have published, start to notice how doing so would only make you into an unimaginative copyist, an amalgam of different styles and arbitrary tricks.

Love the effects that you perform, but never mistake them for the magic. And realise that to perform well, you must step out of the fraternity into yourself, and see of what stuff your dreams are made.

How To Be Yourself

Magic Books that deal with the matter of presentation and performance character are full of the adage, "Be yourself." It is at once an immensely easy and very fiddly thing to achieve. It is a problem that is appropriate for every novice magician, and some serious professionals. A magician getting started generally does so without an awareness of his natural style, for it is something to be learnt over time. Equally, he will be unaware of the importance of the issue at the same time that his friends are aware that he becomes very unlike himself when he performs.

Now a number of performers adopt such an exaggerated persona when performing that it may seem ludicrous to imagine that they are 'being themselves.' I trust that Tamariz steps out of character when he removes the hat and goes home. Otherwise, he would be an exhausting man to know, with his constant offers to friends and family alike to 'show them something *ethpethial*.' His hypnotic relaxation tapes would be a disaster. Yet the character that we are presented with is clearly a comfortable offshoot and exaggeration of a part of his personality, and he sits well with it. We, in turn, may be sobbing into our trousers at the end of a two-hour lecture, but we feel drawn in by it, not alienated. However extreme it may be, and however different it may be from one's own choices, it is a rounded and secure character that does not show any shabbiness at the edges.

A novice magician, on the other hand, attempting to develop a 'wacky' character is more likely to base his character on bright socks

and a bad trousers/jacket combination. While this works extremely well for University professors and conductors, it is a bad place to start for the performer. Tamariz's character starts inside. It has nothing to do with amusing clothing. Anything that does start with the outer trappings will smack of arbitrary image choices rather than the expression of real character. Remember the Stanislavski quote: "One should first grasp the soul of a part not its dress." And the soul of the part is our own.

For our purposes, we are not interested here in wildly comic characters. The rule of 'be yourself' is doubly important when you wish to make your magic plausible, for you must ensure that your character resonates a belief that *it is you*. If you are copying other artists to find a character, you will simply not transmit that belief. *You are not being convincing*. You will probably think you are, but it won't be quite right.

The process required is three-fold: firstly, to gain an awareness of your personality; secondly, to find out which aspects of it are appropriate to concentrate on for the purposes of performance; and thirdly, to tweak those parts like a drama-nipple to make them theatrically rewarding. Resist at any point the temptation to develop characteristics or mannerisms. Your aim is to relax into the part and allow such outward trappings to form unconsciously.

My own performance character is borne from the way I live. I spend my days in a Victorian flat full of neo-gothic trimmings and a sprawling library; I collect taxidermy (only one person to my knowledge noticed that my cat, Spasm, pictured inside the cover of *Pure Effect* is, indeed, a lifeless bag of sawdust with a stiff tail), and have a proper fake bookcase that opens up into my drawing room. I did not develop these to suit my profession: I gradually allowed my

magic persona to fall in line with my lifestyle. When I started, I felt I had to provide my audiences with the image of a magician that they would expect. I donned a big blousy shirt, leather waistcoat and boots, and thought I looked rather cavalierish and street-magicky. Of course, I actually looked like The Gay Gipsy Poet Of The Wild, Wild West.

Slowly I saw that the magic could reflect me and allow me to express something of how I saw the world. One wonderful result of this is that I almost invariably look forward to performing now, for I no longer have to slip into an up-beat character that is not my own.

One issue here is that I choose material that suits my character. A very common mistake made by magicians is to develop a character that *suits the magic they are already performing*. This has to be the wrong way around. If you enjoy mentalism, it does not mean that you must grow a goatee to stroke and wear black shirts. Nor does it mean you should adopt the mannerisms and performance style that you think suits mentalism. You *must* start by examining yourself and gaining knowledge of your own character, and then shaping the material and how you present it to fit you, so that there is no trace of artifice.

How do you gain this understanding of yourself? If you are not especially self-aware, or even, perhaps, if you are, you should simply sit down with someone who knows you well, and who is sensitive and articulate enough to be of use, and ask her to slowly describe your social character as fairly as she can. You listen, and try not to cry, and begin to form a picture in your mind of yourself. See him with those characteristics: imagine and understand him from the viewpoint of the person who is describing you. Start to see yourself from the outside looking in. If she can only describe a nervous or

insecure personality, you will need to start by identifying an area of life where you do feel secure and able, and have someone describe you who knows you in that context.

Now, personality is an odd thing, and changes according to circumstance. Where there are very different sides of you: perhaps a gentleness versus an aggressiveness, or a seriousness measured against an infantile sense of humour, one will be the more common trait. Allow this one to be the aspect included in the image, and if you feel that the opposing trait can enhance it, allow it to perhaps shimmer under the surface, perhaps as a twinkle in the eye to suggest that sense of fun, or an underlying note of dry sarcasm beneath a charming veneer.

Allow this picture to build, and allow it to feel comfortable. If you are told that such things as meanness or suspiciousness are traits that you have, include them in the same way and don't get defensive. When you can see it clearly, you can begin to refine it. In your imagination, watch the character that you have created perform, and see if you like what you see. As he does so, exaggerate aspects of him that are most conducive to performance. For example, if formality and detachment have been named as traits, allow them to become hallmarks of this character, and listen to the vocabulary he uses and the means he employs to communicate his effects. Watch the stylishness develop, and enjoy this suave character in your mind. Where there might be a darker note, allow this to permeate through the character, giving an unnerving edge to the charm or humour. In this way, work your way through the main characteristics and build this personality in your mind.

When this part feels satisfying and complete, make it three-dimensional. Literally move you roving brain-cam around him,

noting his dress and appearance from all sides. See how he would look from someone sat behind. Make the image bright and vivid, colourful and panoramic. Play an imaginary, appropriately evocative piece of music that you know as a soundtrack to accompany the performance and allow it to flesh out even further.

Next, imagine yourself sitting or standing in the sort of place where you do magic the most, and imagine this character coming up to you to perform. Notice how he approaches, how even his opening words deftly communicate much of his character and make you *really want to see his magic*. When he begins, notice how he handles his props, how he interacts with you and the other spectators, and how intriguing a character he is. See also that there is no rigidity to this character: that he would adapt in just the right way to a different type of audience to gain their respect but without compromising his way of doing magic. Take an enormous interest in this personality and how it is communicated in such a genuine way. Notice that there is a quality to the performance that makes you feel comfortable in the hands of a professional.

Then step inside the character. Literally merge with him and see the world from his eyes out. Run through that performance again and *feel* it. Notice how it feels different from whatever you were doing before. Memorise that feeling, and play that soundtrack again if it helps. Run it through several times. Check that it feels comfortable and natural: if something is not right, make any changes. Stay relaxed as you do this, unless the character is very hyperactive.

Finally, imagine yourself days and weeks into the future becoming more and more familiar with this way of performing. See yourself taking a few moments before each performance to begin the soundtrack in your mind and relax into your character. Feel it like

sinking into a bath that is just the right temperature. Then see yourself going out and performing brilliantly.

Allow yourself to get it wrong occasionally at the start: to relapse into old habits by mistake. And as you become more and more familiar with the new way of performing, it starts, of course, to become second nature.

The final stage, once you are entirely comfortable with it, is to be very responsive to feedback. It is easy to misjudge and stick too rigidly to an idea, losing the strength of flexibility. My character, for example, has a strong note of seriousness, but this must be coupled with a good-natured humour, otherwise it would too easily become inappropriate for most venues. I can allow myself to move between those traits to provide texture and a controlled mood, as well as maintaining rapport with the environment.

When I watch the best magical performers and then meet them socially, I am struck by the continuity that exists between their everyday personalities and their performance characters. It is as if they exaggerate themselves a little, and are prepared to have fun with that in a tongue-in-cheek way. When we watch them perform, we sense the richness of their personalities and join in with the character jokes. When Hollingworth apologises for the fact that the last effect may have appeared 'rife with jiggery-pokery,' the expression makes us laugh because we see a clear demonstration of an exaggerated character. This is the stuff of rich situational comedy: humour that does not interfere with the magic but enhances the character. Its success is a signal that the audience has been completely absorbed in a plausible personality. *Your* personality, deftly illuminated and brought to the forefront of your performance.

Prestige and Disillusionment

Over the course of the three afternoons that it has taken me to write this book, I have spoken to many professional and semi-professional close-up magicians about how they feel about their work. There is an issue that always used to linger in the back of my mind, which I often bring up.

It goes something like this. We, as magicians, are aware of the huge industry that caters to us. Because of the enormity of the magic scene, it has given rise to massive in-house politics and ethical issues which often affect our performances, if we are conscientious professionals. We perform such-and-such a trick, for example, but not with such-and-such a presentation, for that belongs to so-and-so, and we change this part, which is ours, and add this bit here, and feel ethically relaxed in showing it. Or we perform an effect a couple of times because the perfect moment arises and feel guilty because know that we shouldn't, for it is the signature piece of another performer and we have no right to do it. Similarly, there can exist an enormous weight behind the effect. For example, I have on a number of occasions performed the Chan Canasta Book Test. Those who follow my opinions will know that I am not a fan of book tests, but any road up, I occasionally perform the test, and it is for me by far the most elegant effect in its class. It is a sheer delight to perform, and I have the glow of knowledge that I am performing a superior piece, created by a master, and which relies so much on sheer personality and brazenness.

All of these involved issues may be in our minds as we perform for a group at whatever unpleasant event at which we find ourselves. But

I ask these magicians the same question: doesn't it all seem *ludicrous*, when you weigh all that against the fact that most of the time to our audiences, we are just providing the trivial delight of a passing hired entertainer? If we are using techniques deemed superior by the cognoscenti but which mean nothing to the uninitiated, isn't there a note of silliness to it all? Over recent years I have seen a couple of effects shown to me by other performers, which I would *love* to perform. But it would be wrong to do so, and moreover I have no wish to perform other people's material. So I don't, but when I look at my work from the point of view of ordinary, non-magical spectators, the issue of intellectual property just seems so laughable.

A case in point: Friends of mine attended a function with me, where one of the absolute greats of magic was performing close-up. This was a name known to us all, but not at the time known to the general public. He was using a lot of his hallmark psychological techniques, but kept *missing* with them. His use of these skills was a wonder to watch, and his handling superb, but as one would expect with such techniques, bad nights must occasionally occur, and this seemed to be one of them. After having seen this modern Father of magic perform his beautiful art for them, their reaction was "God, that magician was crap. Not like that guy in the pub – he was great." The guy in the pub had been a local enthusiast performing a few routines with a pornographic deck of Svengali cards.

I, who had just marvelled at this great man and cringed at the dirty man in the pub, did not know what to say. Were they wrong? No. Were they right? Well, no. One *was* an artist, the other was *not* a particularly good magician. Not because one was only using a Svengali deck, but because one approached his profession with the mind of an artist, and one didn't. But at the same time, the incident

showed me so clearly how little prestige or expert appreciation means in the real world.

It is an odd situation with magic, quite peculiar. In the world of the fine arts, it is only the appreciation of other artists that matters. The public are politely held to be ignorant. A painter or sculptor has far more interest in how his or her work is seen by her peers, than what the lay public make of it. Yet in magic, quite the opposite is true. While many magicians *do* seek the respect of other magicians, which is a blameless activity, it is clearly the case that their approval means nothing compared to the views of the ordinary spectators who see them work on a daily basis. There are plenty of coin- and card-workers whom we delight in watching at conventions, but who would quite possibly bore an ordinary spectator fairly quickly. Indeed, professionals with a true appreciation for their art know that the respect of the fraternity is a hollow victory, and means very little indeed. This is an odd cynicism, yet we would be very suspicious of a magician who spoke of his yearnings to be respected primarily by the community.

I was struck by the peculiarity of the situation when I spoke to a friend with no particular interest in magic about lecturing for magicians. I had been asked to speak at a few clubs but was not eager to do so. I tried to explain that one had to be careful about courting the admiration of the fraternity, as it was distracting and irrelevant compared to following one's career and vision as a performer. Her reaction was complete surprise: it struck her that to be respected by other magicians would surely be a sign of truly remarkable ability as a performer. It seemed to her to be the pinnacle of success.

A curious conundrum! In any other field, I imagine that would be the case. Perhaps the difference is that in magic, the people who make up that fraternity are primarily hobbyists – whereas in fine art, the artistic community is one of, well, artists. On a recent excursion into the sexy, thrusting world of television-watching, I caught an episode of your popular 'X'-Files, one that dealt with the exploits of two apparently feuding magicians. Here, the work of the young expert was compared to the rather dated and merely adequate performance of the older, jaded magician. One of the two FBI persons, and I forget their names but remember that they sounded rather contrived and silly, commented that the two performances seemed essentially rather similar. "Ah," replied our young genius, "but Mozart and Salieri sound the same to the layman."

This really stuck in my mind. Is there truth in this? Are there objective standards, which can be allocated to magic in this way? Is the lay audience really the judge and jury when it comes to sorting the wheat from the chaff, or are they just that – laymen who, in their essential ignorance, do not have the ability to decide? Should we judge a magician's standard by his popularity amongst his peers, or his commercial success?

Luckily, we do not need to find an answer to this question. There are different ways of measuring magicians, and the best will always have their eye on the way that the public respond to them. The *genuinely informed*, professional element of the fraternity should see their members from the viewpoint of a lay-audience and judge in a well-rounded way. But an interesting issue is raised. Namely, that unless we have had the good fortune of our own television shows and are known already to our audiences, any prestige that we have amongst our peers means absolutely nothing unless we can communicate that to each audience that we sit down with. Each time

that we begin performing for our audience, we have to communicate those aspects of us that make us good at what we do, and give us authority within the group. This will grant us our prestige. Because, to pick up on an earlier point, if we don't communicate it as such, it ceases to exist. However good we feel we are, and however much excellent feedback we have received, we cannot rest upon that and lose sight of the fact that if an audience do not know our work, then they don't care a fig for our estimations of our talents.

In close-up work, this is especially important. I have caught myself on occasion, after an evening of excellent work, which carried me on a wave of satisfaction and delight, approaching a final group as an after-thought before leaving. Still in a world of my own self-satisfaction, I would forget the preliminaries and move straight into more magic, which was all flowing so well. Afterwards, I would realise that that final group, despite my own florid estimations of my art at that time, had just seen a couple of tricks. Whilst I was imagining myself and my magic as impossibly special, I had forgotten to communicate that to them.

Prestige, real or imagined, is a fallacy in any magic performance where the audience are unaware of it. When this Great Magician performed his effects and missed with his psychological ploys, he was seen as clearly rubbish. When the effects did work, they were received only with an air of detached amusement, for his prestige had failed from the start. I, who was bathing in his prestige, thought it all to be wonderful.

Prestige is just suggestion. It is communicating a perceived sense of authority, which renders the person with the inferior status a far more suggestible. But if it does not exist in that cloud of knowledge

and awareness that precedes us, then we must create it through deft scripting at the start of our performance. Every single time.

Now, this brings us back to that original question. Here we are, essentially amusements in the eyes of our audiences, getting all worked up over something that is, by nature of that fact, essentially trivial. Doesn't it all seem daft? And when I used to ask that question, my personal answer was invariably in the affirmative. I still feel that there is *something* of value in seeing the trivial side of what we do, but I have also come to see another aspect to it, which while it may not be exactly *important*, can be certainly wonderful. Yet when I asked it of the working magicians whom I encountered, I often received essentially the same answer. *Yes, I am increasingly aware of how trivial it is, and I hate doing this run-of-the-mill stuff, which you can't really expect anyone to take seriously. I am bored of doing the same tricks, and even if I start doing a new one I get bored of that too, and I know it all seems so pointless and I hate the fact that they find it pretty pointless too. I do the same tired tricks, and because I know they're trivial, I sort of make fun of them too, because they seem stupid to me now too. I want to do something else with my magic, to have people take it and me seriously, but I don't know what.*

This is the disillusionment of the working close-up magician. Hopefully it means that one more magician is about to change for the better and never look back. When we reach that point, when our performance and attitude become jaded and weary, self-effacing and apologetic, there are two options. One is eventually to stop performing, bored with the whole thing. Which means one less jaded magician in the world, which is a good thing for the rest of humanity. But the other option is to re-discover the art completely, and change one's idea of what magic is, and what one's role as a magician might be. This way, we get to experience why being a

magician is the best job in the world. We can go out to perform, curious as to what the evening might bring, and what we might learn for ourselves.

I reiterate to you, Dear Reader, that you should not think of yourself as a mere hired entertainer even when you are. You must play that part to the booker, and fit in appropriately with the venue, but you are actually there to give a fresh bunch of people an unforgettable time. You are going to create a corner of the party where guests will be lifted out of themselves for a while. You are going to provide moments of wonder that will be the anecdotes told across dinner-tables or to other magicians at other functions twenty years in the future. You are to move between the guests with the quiet and sly agenda of your own unnerving potential. You are the magician, you control the magic. Don't do the tired routines, borne from an arbitrary series of choices you made ten years ago about what to perform. Lose the sponge balls and anything that you feel that you couldn't hold a room's attention with, and start choosing material that suits the impact that you would most like to make. Have the courage to think from this starting-point, and to leave ninety-percent of your repertoire behind you. Then go out to perform fresh and eager to improve even more, and from the moment you arrive, *invent and walk your own prestige*. Carry it around with you with the quiet nature of the man confident in his authority. Communicate it thoroughly and subtly before any magic begins.

Start with the presumption that performing magic should be the most enjoyable and beautiful thing imaginable, and let your imagination take you along the path of discovery. What you learn is your right as a performer to embody: *you* are the magician, *you* perform magic in the way *you* feel it should be, *you* control the

magic, it doesn't (through dictating what is 'tried and tested' or a 'sure-fire commercial winner') control you.

It's a whole new job.

A Note on Perverse Spectator Handling

Picture the unfortunate, classic situation. The magician approaches a table, briefly introduces himself to the diners, and asks a lady if he may borrow her ring. She is unsure, a little embarrassed, not knowing if she really wants to be involved. The performer has done nothing to ingratiate himself, he has not come across as remotely intriguing. She is unsure whether he has been hired by the venue or is just some clown showing off, so she really doesn't know whether she should lend him anything valuable.

Eventually, more out of embarrassment than anything else, she removes her ring, having caught her husband's eye for approval first. The magician takes it.

Now, please ask yourselves, for you are all magicians. Why, dear Lord, is it now customary for the performer, having barely gained the trust of this lady, to now make insulting comments about the ring? I mean, what is that about?

"Lovely. You should have it made into a ring"

"I've seen these available in gold"

"I'll be careful. I guess it has to go back on Monday"

"Oh, what does this say? It's inscribed... K... E... L... oh, 'Kelloggs'"

"Look, it's chipped where it feel out of the cracker"

"Christ, you have appalling taste in jewellery. And you're overweight too"

Where do we get this from? Am I missing something obvious, or is there something deeply perverse about interrupting people while they are enjoying themselves, demanding that they trust you when we do nothing to communicate that trustworthiness, and then make insulting comments? Has it ever happened that the lady has snatched the ring back and said, "Well, if you don't like it I'll have it back." I hope this has occurred on occasion. I hope that a magician has made an insulting comment about someone's shirt and then been punched full in the face.

On stage, sometimes these things can work. From our performance area, the stage, we can often get away with repetitive good-natured insulting of certain members of the audience. This, handled well, can be funny, though it can more easily be mishandled. But the issue of performance space is an important one. In close-up magic, we approach a group and enter their space. As I have said previously, it is vital for strong magic that we reverse that dynamic and control the area as if it were our own. But this must happen in an unspoken way: on the surface, we must still show a respect for the fact that we have invited ourselves over. To hurl the same sorts of insults across the restaurant table that a stage performer might get away with when dealing with a heckler would be disastrous. Similarly, when we invite an audience member into *our* space on stage, or at our own close-up table, he or she is our guest, and should be handled in an appropriately respectful way.

Yet close-up magicians continue to be rude. "Make your mind a blank. Oh, that was quick!" Worse, these dull comments tend to be made by the most charmless, ineffectual performers who couldn't even carry a good joke if it was quite light and came with big handles.

Magic is about a psychological journey, and it is the task of the magician to deftly manipulate and guide the emotional states of his spectators to reach that magical point. When this is done, magic is elevated from the mere presentation of tricks. I hope this is an unequivocal statement. Given that fact, we would need a very good reason to embarrass or humiliate our volunteers. It may be the stuff of comedy, but it is not the stuff of magic.

On occasions, and in large enough groups, a likeable magician can probably get away with it, if he is equipped with a professional attitude towards the use of such comments. In a close-up situation especially, the performer must have a very clear appreciation of his character to see whether or not he should make a humorously insulting comment when a perfect situation arises. Equally he should have an appreciation for the timing and delivery of the line. Then the use of such an occasional comment becomes a performance choice, not just a tired use of inappropriate cliché. Too often, the magicians who make these insulting comments, and make them badly, are young and inexperienced, still trotting out lines rather than imparting the experience of magic. And being 'comically' insulted by a teenager who wears a polyester bow-tie and his school-shirt to entertain you is fantastically unpleasant.

What is the point of using these lines? If they are there to get a laugh, surely it would be better to direct them at oneself. In doing so, one diffuses one's status for a moment and the audience appreciate it. In

a card routine I perform, a point was always reached where I spread out the three chosen cards for a round of Find The Lady. "Normally played with a Queen and two other cards. Now, we don't have a Queen here – " I would say, then pause and look at a male spectator near me for a moment, " – no we don't, so we'll use these three." The pause was well-timed and it 'got a laugh.' I continued using this line for a long time, until one night, when I came to ask a question of the same spectator a little later in the routine. He shrugged and said that he didn't care, adding that I had 'called him a queen earlier on.'

It was a moment similar to realising that putting my foot on the table was an appalling piece of behaviour. I would have no wish to make a sexually disparaging comment to my volunteer, and had not imagined it to be insulting. But of course the spectator doesn't realise that I use that as a stock line every time I come to that point in the routine: he sees it as a personal comment and may indeed take offence if he is so inclined.

The line I now use is, "Now we don't have a Queen here – " then I pause in the same way and look down at *myself* and add, "erm, despite the fob-watch and waistcoat..." and carry on. I am aware of how excruciatingly unfunny these things sound when analysed in print, and it is by no means a great joke, or even a particularly good one. I mention it only to show the difference between how the reference was directed. In the second version, it is still a good-humoured jostle, but this time at myself. Nobody takes offence, and only twice in four years have I taken myself outside and beaten me up.

Shortsighted arrogance can be a major problem for close-up magicians, and redirecting these comments at oneself can go a long way to diffusing that unpleasant streak. It is born, of course, out of

insecurity, as I have mentioned before. Dealing with this insecurity is a major step to improving one's performance, and shifting from the role of the generic hired-magician or geek to the imparter of wonder. When the performer works from a base-point of embarrassment at his own material or presence, the performance becomes inherently embarrassing. The performer may have become so used to his material that he *feels* confident in approaching guests, but he may still be performing from a presupposed sense of embarrassment and awkwardness. The following strike me as manifestations of this sometimes entirely unconscious process:

- The magician stalls as long as possible before approaching a group.
- He has to drink before performing.
- He begins the set with a trick to get their attention rather than with an introduction.
- He hurries from one trick to the next.
- He feels that it is impossible to get people to take his close-up magic really seriously.
- He apologises for being the magician, aware that it must seem tacky.
- He apologises before starting a card-trick, aware that card-tricks are supposed to be boring.
- He views each group as a challenge.

- He is happy to expose a method or two if it gets a laugh.
- He is more interested in getting a laugh than performing strong magic ('Serious' comedy-magicians excepted).
- He is over-stuffed with effects that he doesn't perform.
- He talks too quickly or too quietly.
- He gets angry or upset when a spectator treats him with disrespect.
- He insults spectators.
- He is impatient with spectators.
- He does not particularly enjoy performing his magic. It is a job like any other.
- His audiences don't seem as responsive as he would like, even though the tricks are known to be good ones.

Now, even the most secure performer will feel one or two of these from time to time, because we are all human and sometimes have no desire to perform. But these are our off-days, and if we still give a good performance when we are ourselves less than happy with it, then we must give ourselves the benefit of the doubt and count ourselves as decent performers. But much of this book deals with the necessary attitude that a good magician must have when approaching performance, and there is no room there for

embarrassment. I used to experience all the above in one way or another, at one time or another. After rediscovering magic for myself, I can no more feel embarrassed about performing it than I could feel embarrassed about inviting guests into a home of which I felt proud. I wish upon every magician that process of rediscovery. I wish that he would feel only delight in approaching a group of spectators, only pride in his material, and that those who receive his magic would feel respected and flattered that they have been a part of it.

Thank you For Your Time.

If there is anything I have to say in summary, it is this: have an aesthetic vision for your magic, and let the realisation of that vision be the reason for performing. Be clear in your mind what your magic looks and feels like: what the experience of your magic is to your audience. Let that clarity drive the creation of your verbal and non-verbal communication as you perform, and dictate the material you choose. And work to *transmit* your material, not just present it.

I have written this book with a confidence in my own beliefs, but as I said at the start I must risk sounding arrogant in order to communicate fully the model I have in mind for magic. *It is, I repeat, only my model, and by no means the correct one.* There is no 'correct one.' I hope that you have seen me through that model: understood its aims, considered the conflicts and problems that would beset it, and found some worth in seeing the model through. I have risked becoming enamoured with that model myself – but to reiterate, theory must follow practice, and few areas must remain as fervently pragmatic as conjuring. So if these considerations have been new to you, get out and apply what you can as best you can, but keep your eyes and ears open for the feedback that will let you know whether you are reaching your goals. If you take to my ideas, then absorb what I have written as an attitude, rather than a set of techniques, and from that attitude develop your *own* techniques, and form your *own* model that makes mine seem incomplete and naïve.

That's all I have to say: other than to thank you for being one more decent and conscientious magician out there who, amongst all that

dreadful, meaningless, patronising magic presented throughout the world, is prepared to really give his work some thought. I hope that means one less bored, jaded professional, and would be delighted to think that the world has one more magician who feels a real excitement about his work and is prepared to invest real effort and thought into it. One who never loses sight of the transporting potential of magic to an intelligent, modern adult audience.

Best wishes,

Derren Brown.

Epilogue:

An Essay

Can Magic be Art? New Thoughts

One cannot look at a magic-related Internet discussion e-group notice-board web-forum without seeing the word 'art' bandied up and down the electric super-motorway as if art and magic were two concepts unequivocally equated and the most well-suited word-companions that one could ever hope to find fumbling with each other in the coats-room at an ideas-party. It seems that through the literature of magicians determined to deem their own magic important and worthwhile, a whole new generation of novices has been born which learns artistic pretensions before an in-jog overhand shuffle replacement. Indeed it would seem to the casual surfer of these virtual fora that the artistic community had recently accepted magic (in particular close-up magic with lots of touching) as a Fine Art and ranks the Sucker Silks along with the *opera* (and I use the word very cleverly to mean the plural of *opus*) of Bach.

Such is one extreme. On the other hand, so much as mention concepts of art to the average 'working pro' and he will deem such discussion ludicrously pretentious: after all, magic is about what's *commercial*, what's loud enough to be heard over noise, what gets the laughs. It is a craft, he will say, and there is no room for talk of art. He will judge his success by the number of bookings taken in a year and little else interests him: he happily performs exclusively the material of other performers (all fairly published I am sure) and spurns any abstract discussion of performance.

Magicians at both extremes seem to miss something, and both groups are potentially just as patronising and risible as each other.

One meets plenty of the latter type, but I wonder how much they genuinely *enjoy* their work. Presumably they *express* little with it, and if they do not seek to do so, I imagine that they are happy just going out and performing the same routines night after night and counting their cash at the end of the year. Presumably they might as well be doing any kind of freelance work: the magic is an incidental choice of craft. Now I know the importance of business acumen and firmly believe that we should all spend our professional lives making plenty of money from what we enjoy, so I have no quarrel with the canny marketing ability of some of these magicians. But when these people with their sharp suits and unpleasant odour talk of their extensive trade-show work as if it were the pinnacle of performance success, I try to create a distraction and leave. ("Look! Eugene's beard's on fire." or "Look out! Max has got a gun.")

It is a shame that more magicians do not *live* their magic, (although that does not mean pathologically plucking coins from a shop-clerks' ears each time you pay for something... *there is a fine line between wishing to produce child-like astonishment and treating people like infants*) and a pity that more do not find a certain romance and delightful wickedness in it, or that joy of taking people to the edge of their models of the world and showing them the chasm beyond. I can only enjoy what magic gives me, and remain utterly delighted that I have nothing better to do with my time than walk around figuring out impossibilities or awakening to find a delivery or two of expensive gadgetry waiting for me on my doorstep.

I suppose we cannot approach magic artistically if we do not possess such a sensibility. To treat it as art in a way that was only fooling ourselves could be immensely odious and rife with pretension. If the artistic world-view is alien to a particular magician, I imagine it a futile endeavour to attempt to convince him that the elusive beauty

of art may reside in areas close to his craft. If he remains happy drawing little creative satisfaction from his profession, and if he never experiences the feeling of *elevating* his performances beyond trickery but knows no different, then so be it. If it just remains a job, or a hobby, and never really *means* anything to him, then all good luck to him with his endeavour. We must part company amicably.

But for those of us who do approach our magic as having the potential of being art, or at least genuinely artistic, we have open to us a new aspect of ourselves that constantly grows and challenges us, one which delights and instructs, and one in which we might find a means of imparting our peculiar slant on the world. However, the benefits derived from this approach do not automatically render the practice art. Do those of us who deem magic art merely seek a soothing tonic for that guilty feeling of fraudulence, which besets any conscientious performer? Does it stem from the desperate cries of ageing magicians who, perhaps, approach the twilight of their careers and worry that their success in the magic world means very little? Are we merely frustrated performance artists trapped in a pedestrian genre, desperately seeking some illusion of worth in a trivial pastime? Is this chapter nothing more than the frightened mouth-rubbish of a goateed quack who fears he may be living a terrible lie?

How are we to decide? It is clearly the case that magic does not immediately call out to be recognised as art. We must begin our search for answers by turning to the seminal *Our Magic* by Maskelyne and Devant. This was the first time that magic theory was set out for the fraternity, and remains, in my opinion, still the best work of its type. The section of the book of most interest to us at this juncture is the first part, in which Nevil Maskelyne carries out

an extensive and quite wonderful study of 'The Art in Magic,' which, in his words,

> "is a very different thing from "The Art *of* Magic. The latter term may embrace an immense number of diverse considerations. The former relates to one side only of magic; a side which has never received the attention it deserves. Our immediate aim is the elucidation of those fundamental principles which, being reduced to practice, justify the claim of magic to be classed among the Arts – not, of course, the mechanical arts, but among the Fine Arts – the Arts with a capital A."

This statement contains a faith in the status of magic that would nowadays easily strike us as misguided. The double-edged prolificacy of close-up magic and dealer business, which has both allowed our profession to flourish and be trivialised, has opened the floodgates to enthusiasts who have affected the popular conception of magic for better and for worse. The term 'sleight-of-hand artist' suggests little in the way of creativity and less of gravitas, and indeed the feel of modern close-up magic would seem to be a reaction against an old school seen as pompous and out-of-date. The result is a modern form of entertainment that happily trivialises itself, and would be embarrassed to deal with the issue of art.

What a concept... magic placed amongst the Fine Arts. However, the pride felt by Maskelyne and the sweeping authority with which he makes comments on art and related issues are relics from a Victorian age: one which delighted in grand statements and orgulous, magnificent artworks. We manifested then a pride in our age and a faith in the worth of our constructs, which I, personally, would dearly love to exist in some form today.

The story today is depressingly different. Art and ideas are disposable: London's grand and everlasting Crystal Palace could never be built in a post-modern world – instead we have a temporary Millennium Dome, built to stand for a while and then be taken away. It was a moving moment for me when the gilded and ostentatious Albert Memorial was uncovered in London a few years ago after being renovated to its former high Victorian glory. The post-colonial guilt felt by intellectual middle-America has no doubt given rise to some of the wilder excesses of hermeneutic relativism, and we can no longer comfortably make definitive and objective statements about ourselves and the world for fear of oppressing and offending. We may have left behind the mentality that justified slavery and the British Empire, but instead we have veered close to a kind of intellectual nihilism. We have left the workhouses for trendy schools and parenting schemes which would never impose structure and direction upon children for fear of oppressing them with 'discipline.'

Unfortunately for Nevil Maskelyne, we can no longer talk of art in the same way that he does in this magnificent book. Since his writing in 1911 art theory has swung and leapt in various directions, and the complacency of that period is far behind us. It is worth looking at Maskelyne's approach to defining art and the movement of aesthetic theory and the Philosophy of Art over the century to our current situation. Then, perhaps, a new defence can be offered for our own ambiguous times. If we can allow ourselves validly to approach magic as having the potential of art, then we can approach it as more than craftsmen and copyists. In doing so, we can develop creatively and start to *express* something with our work.

Art as Representation

Maskelyne writes at the start of his argument:

> "From the time of Aristotle to the present date, the consensus of authorities has decided that all art is based on imitation. Most of the authorities have 'flown off the handle' in trying to decide what constitutes art in the abstract, but all agree that the basis of art is imitation – either the imitation of something that actually *exists*, or of something that *might* exist in circumstances imagined by the artist... Herein, we may justly say that we stand upon sure ground – and here we may rest, so far as primary considerations are concerned. We have no need to be led out of our depth by trying to define that will-o'-the wisp, "abstract art."

Well, it is worth treading carefully into deeper waters in this case. This Platonic-Aristotelian notion of art as imitation no longer stands. As a theory, it was the first historical attempt to provide a necessary condition for art status. Known as the *mimetic theory*, it was well-suited to the days of Greek tragedy, but ultimately falls flat today. True, a magical effect does imitate a supernatural occurrence, but if this criterion for art status is insufficient, then we cannot allow magic to stand as art according to it.

Reading Maskelyne's argument at this point, I am surprised that he chooses the word 'imitate' over 'represent.' The representational theory of art is the softened version of the mimetic theory, and a moment's consideration will see the wisdom of the shift. What, after all, does a piece of music *imitate*? Or a novel? Both may represent emotions or ideas, but neither imitates anything, unless we are playing *Carnival of the Animals* to a least favourite child and pointing out Saint-Saëns' amusing use of the orchestra to conjure up the

sounds and frolics of bestial larking about. But other than the familiar instrumental sounds of birdsong, babbling brooks and the like, music is rarely going to be concerned with imitation. Literature is even further removed from the idea of imitation, and more likely to be taken up with the business of representation. This may seem a pedantic point, but it is vital to building an understanding of what art might be.

Is it enough, then to hold that x is art as long as it is a representation? As I sit here alone as God intended in my first-class carriage of the 15.15 from Bristol to Paddington tapping away on a brand-new laptop computer, I see to my right a complimentary copy of the *Sunday Times* open to the television section. I see a two-page spread representing the day's television screenings. I see representation, but I do not see art. Nicely laid out as it is. I would engage the stewardess in a discussion of the problem, but have so far successfully avoided buying a ticket for this journey – something of a habit of mine. I do not wish to attract undue attention. If she starts talking about this problem of art-as-representation herself I shall just laugh and laugh and laugh.

Clearly there can be representation without art, but more interestingly there is plenty of art around devoid of representation. German expressionist dance, much modern theatre, and plenty of avant-garde art represent nothing and refer only to themselves and the artistic context in which they are to be interpreted. Those people who judge the artistic merit of a painting by how closely it represents its subject matter in likeness are known well to the rest of us as Philistines. These men (to describe a peculiarly British cliché) sit behind the mini-bar in the corner of the mock-Tudor front room of their nineteen-seventies house with the nasty oak nameplate and the home-made patio transferring ice-cubes from a plastic pineapple

into a glass of Rosé wine while they listen to a CD of the London Philharmonic playing orchestral versions of soft-rock classics and insist on pointing out all sorts of amusing details hidden in a series of fourth-rate prints of bad sentimental Victorian paintings and a couple of well-known impressionist pieces that have been indifferently framed and are fixed firmly to the floral wall beneath the frieze and near the enormous stalks of coloured pampas grass and embroidered poetry. Well, I may not know much about pretension, but I know what I like. The tendency to cling unknowingly to the representational theory of art and equate photographic likeness with artistic success is generally seen as a sign of ignorance. Should you be balking at the suggestion of snobbery in this straightforward fact, I need only remind you that I refrain feverishly from referring to those who possess no knowledge of magic technique as 'laypeople.' That strikes me as a far more ridiculous pomposity.

Art as Expression

Art as representation remained the most popular theory throughout most of art history, and in many ways it was the dawn of photography which forced change to the scene. Once it became possible effortlessly to capture a likeness with the camera, realist painting was in danger of seeming redundant. However, the nineteenth century saw the first major shift away from the representational theory of art to an *expressionist* one. The artist as an almost scientific recorder of accuracy was slowly replaced by the artist as a frustrated emotional creature, using his medium to express profoundly felt sentiment. Dainty poets with velvet jackets (quite charming couture even to this day) sprang up in Paris salons

all over the world, sporting lace handkerchiefs into which the fashionably consumptive could noisily cough blood. There was a pained, frilly effeminacy to art of this time, which was not seen again until the popular music of the nineteen-eighties.

Rather than representing the external world, it became the lot of the artist to *express* his internal one. Despite many years' familiarity with the issues of avant-garde and post-modern art, it is still the Bohemian image of the struggling artist that dominates the popular conception today. The emotional saturation of art was a conscious rebellion against the old school of the eighteenth century, and freed the artist to explore his medium and himself. Perhaps most dramatically, Beethoven changed the face of music forever. The refinement of the Baroque age, most perfectly and powerfully executed by Bach, already having been coarsened under Mozart, now gave out to a very different agenda: music became a gushing expression of emotion, yielded its secrets upon first listening and provided sentimental *substitutes* for the most affecting experiences of life rather than, as Bach and the Renaissance sacred choral masters before him had offered, exquisite *distillations* of the richness of existence. Musical philistinism still harks back to the ethos of this period. Music, to quote Robertson Davies, is like wine: the less you know about it, the sweeter you like it.

With this shift also came a new way of seeing for the visual artists. Questioning the way in which we perceive fleeting reality, the early impressionists began to render on canvas what seemed to them to be an accurate record of the impression of reality which we receive. This grew into more and more abstraction through the cubist movement, as the very nature of art began to be questioned in a way that would take us right to the avant-garde art that we know today. By the time that Maskelyne and Devant were writing, theories of art-

as-expression were very popular. Freud's works, while already known to academics, were about to explode upon the artistic scene, and add a scientific validity to the deeply-wrought urges and emotions of artists by popularising the idea of the unconscious. It would seem that Maskelyne's refusal to step into the 'deep waters' of art theory may have been connected with a desire to avoid the issue of art as expression, but even so, he does seem to be working from a decidedly old-school starting point for his day.

Expression theories of art abound and vary, forming the popular conception of what constitutes art status. Tolstoy popularised this idea of art as the expression, or *communication* of emotion. In his delightful essays on the subject (*What is Art? And Essays on Art*), he defines art as 'an activity by means of which one man, having experienced a feeling, intentionally transmits it to others.' Bernard Shaw described this as 'the simple truth: the moment it is uttered, whoever is really conversant with art recognises in it the voice of the master.' However, according to Tolstoy's definition, if I am attacked in the street by a bull and then describe the incident to a third parties, telling the story in such a way that they are roused to feel my pain, then I have infected them with my emotion and therefore created a work of art. Surely we would find this an unhappy conclusion, and in this way the theory is too inclusive.

Similarly, Tolstoy would find novels and supposed artworks that deal with emotions not experienced by the author to be counterfeit art. Skilful manipulation of language to produce an emotional effect would not be enough to qualify as true art. As far as the artist is concerned,

> "... it is necessary that he should stand on the level of the highest life-conception of his time, that he should experience

> feeling, and have desire and capacity to transmit it, and that he should moreover have a talent for some one of the forms of art."

Aside from the circularity of this statement (for it is demanding a talent for art as a qualification for status as an artist, which rather begs the question), its seeming straightforwardness is also belied by the problem of exclusiveness. Throughout his essay, Tolstoy upholds the simple idea that to qualify as a work of art, a piece need only be an expression of feeling that infects the recipient, (intellectual theorising and art criticism is therefore, according to his idea, redundant.) Does this hold with what we accept as art nowadays?

If we hold an actor's performance to be a work of art, we cannot always do so under this theory of transmitting emotions to audiences. It is necessary (according to that theory) that the artist transmit the same feeling that he has experienced. If he is playing a villain, he may wish to transmit a feeling of animosity, but will presumably not be feeling that hatred himself about the character. Similarly, an artist will often employ a technique to create an effect upon an audience, one which will induce an emotional effect, but which is *calculated* rather than experienced by the artist. It seems a romantic notion (of the truest kind) to expect the artist to be suffering the turmoil which he manifests upon paper or canvas.

More clearly, there is plenty of art, which absolutely defies the expressionist theory. Some, like the Symbolist art of the late nineteenth century, merely suggests vague moods rather than transmitting particular emotional states. It was prized for its elusiveness. Others, like the Surrealists and various avant-garde artists, have produced 'aleatoric art,' that is, art that is randomly generated and purposefully expresses nothing. Also, according to

this transmission theory, the emotions in question must be personal and individualized rather than generic (otherwise every greetings card would be an artwork), but this does not leave room for much religious art, which for centuries was painted to express the same generic sentiments. These are works which may be amongst our finest art treasures, yet do not fulfil the criteria of art as an intended transmission of the self-same *individualized* emotion that the artist has himself experienced.

Again, some works such as those of Escher present us with perceptual puzzles, and are cognitive rather than emotive in nature. Are we to deny them art status? What of the vast amount of modern painting and performance that is created to make us question the nature of the genre? German Expressionist dance, already mentioned, is typically concerned with the nature of dance, in the same way that paintings that show only a few blocks of colour are there primarily to make us question our preconceptions about what painting is.

At another level, there are logical problems with this idea of arousing in the audience the same emotion that is expressed in the piece. A character in a film or novel may express remorse for, say, a murder, but the audience will be infected not with remorse but pity. They themselves have killed no one, therefore the emotion expressed and the emotion aroused will not be the same. Or perhaps the emotion aroused is not a human quality. A painting may, for example, express fortitude, which is not possible to arouse in an audience. And some artworks may express anthropomorphic properties like anger or desire, but lack the resources to arouse those emotions in the audience. Orchestral music is like this: one does not literally become angry when listening to a piece that expresses anger,

for anger needs an object to be angry about, a criterion that music does not inherently supply.

And what of magic? I feel that where magic is spoken of as art, it is within the area of art-as-expression that a defence is offered. I think immediately of the magical theatre of Penn and Teller, of their magic, which expresses so deftly a particular world-view through dramatic and emotionally engaging presentation. The power of their live performances depends upon their clear vision and the understanding of theatre through which that vision is expressed. I think also of the preoccupation of many close-up magicians who force inappropriate agenda upon presentations of card-tricks and the like, rendering them pretentious and self-conscious 'artistic' efforts which have about them a contrivance and a sense of gross misjudgement.

For the moment, though, let us continue in finding a way of understanding how one might arrive at a means of conferring art status. The expression theory is not wholly satisfying.

Art and Form

Modern art evolved gradually, beginning with the Impressionists' deconstruction of the visual experience and the loosening of the solidity of the image. It continued with the experimentation of Cézanne, as objects became reduced to their geometric shapes to reveal visual structure. Picasso, Braque and the Cubist movement followed, and on their heels came abstract art, which has been at the forefront of twentieth century painting.

As mentioned before, much abstract art represents nothing at all, and a new model was needed to allow modern art to be seen as art. In the same way that we must find a criterion for art status which may include the performance of magic, a new way of looking at art was necessary to include this new and controversial wave of painting which was evolving into something which no former theories of art could embrace. A criterion was needed which would include all past art, and that criterion was, according to the influential theorist Clive Bell, the *possession of significant form*. In other words, some salient design must be offered – a uniformity of structure which encourages us to consider the ways in which our perceptual sensibilities interact with the composition of the piece. According to this theory, the representational content of a piece is entirely irrelevant.

The theory carries across well into orchestral music, which never sat comfortably with the representational theories. It allowed works previously disallowed as art (such as decorative arts and other non-representational areas) to become enfranchised, and would seem to be a welcome departure from the previous theories which were concerned with the content of a piece (and therefore were doomed to failure as inevitable changes in artistic concerns continually changed the role of art and the artist). As well as non-representative art, it allows, for example, for the non-expressive art mentioned in the last section – for all these artworks will still have the common denominator of significant form.

However, a mathematical theorem also has significant form yet is not art, so there is a further qualification to be made, namely that the piece must be *designed primarily in order to possess and to exhibit significant form*.

A classic objection to this theory comes in the grotesque shape of the various demon figures carved in parts of the primitive world to ward off intruders. They are designed to scare people, and it would be ludicrous to suggest that they are made with any intention to exhibit form. Indeed, this kind of cognitive consideration of the pieces would defeat their purpose. Yet we show these pieces in our museums and count them as artworks. So in this way, the formalist theory is too exclusive. If we drop the criterion of *intention*, then we would have to include nature as art, for nature also possesses significant form. Obviously this cannot be allowed. But perhaps the biggest problem with the notion of significant form is how we decide what form is significant, and there is no answer that can be offered here which is not circular or equally as ill-defined.

Modern music aficionados will know the John Cage piece called *4′ 33,"* which consists of a pianist sitting at the keyboard for that period of time but not striking any of the keys. The point of the piece is that we, as an audience, become attuned to any audible sounds for that period, sounds that become the piece itself. Sounds of chairs scraping, and members of the audience coughing, yawning and sobbing would all become part of that performance. Therefore it cannot be argued that the piece has any form, for it is different in every performance and purposefully formless. This and other formless pieces exist, and are considered art. The formalist theory simply is not wide enough to explain this. A similar problem exists with the monochrome paintings of Reinhardt and the like already mentioned: as blocks of single colours, they cannot be said to possess form. Furthermore, we added the notion of a primary intention to exhibit form as a means of disallowing such things as a mathematical theorem status as art. But what of the mathematician who produces a more elegant version of an already known truth? Or the chessmaster who similarly intends to exhibit form in terms of

elegance? These people are intending to show significant form, yet we still cannot call it art. Dai Vernon was known to us for revolutionising many aspects of magic, and in teaching a simplified and more elegant means of card control to a knowledgeable audience, and one which improves upon a previous version, he could be said to be having the primary intention to exhibit significant form. Yet neither the move nor the act of teaching it is *in itself* art.

Between these problems and the neglect of the role of content in conferring art status, formalism failed and neo-formalism took over. This latter theory demanded that the work have both form and content and that the both are related to each other in a satisfyingly appropriate manner. This will allow for Cage's piece: it has a form that is satisfyingly appropriate to its content. If he wants us to realise that ordinary sounds are worth listening to, he has come up with a very good way of ensuring that. But the idea of content – i.e., a *meaning* to the work, the thing that the work is about, is a problematic one. There is plenty of art that has no meaning, and is there simply to create an effect on its audiences. Rococo ironwork filigree, much architecture and ornamentation may just be there to be pleasurable, yet we call it art. Much orchestral music may be the same. Therefore this reworking of the formalist account still fails due to the problem of necessary content/meaning.

Magic at its best is very much about a satisfyingly appropriate relationship between form and content. However, it is the case that if one magician performs the material of another (and dear God it has happened in the past), the form, content and relationship between the two may remain the same, but we cannot call this type of performance art. The performer is not an artist, he is a copyist. The original performance *may* have been art, but the effect alone cannot

carry that status. An interesting issue arises here which may help us. The form of a painting exists in the arrangement of lines and colours made by the artist. If this arrangement supports the meaning of the piece (for example, it draws our eye to the area of the painting where the main action is occurring and guides us through the work in a way which clearly communicates the situation at hand), then we have a piece of art according to the neo-formalist account. In magical performance, are the routines themselves form or content? It is tempting to answer that they must be the content of the performance, but I would disagree. We have seen that in this formalist account of painting, the content is the *meaning* of the piece, not the components of the picture. In a magical performance, the routines are analogous to the *form* of the painting: they are choices made by the performer to support the meaning of his performance. What is that meaning? What is the *content* of the performance if it is not the tricks themselves? It is the vision of the performer, the point of his magic. It is what he is choosing to express through the performance.

This, then, is my notion of the Greater Effect, where we must see individual routines as mere methods to achieving the magical effect, which is the magician and his performance and whatever he is choosing to say with his magic. And in the same way that we must subordinate method to effect in magic, so too we must always look to the greater effect of our performance and see the individual tricks as relatively unimportant. In a poor performance where there are only tricks over which to puzzle, then those routines are standing as content, which is artistically dissatisfying, for they go nowhere. Under these circumstances, magic stands only as a craft. When there is no meaning to which the effects relate in a satisfyingly appropriate manner as form, then there is no art.

We are closer to our goal, yet we have seen that the formalist accounts do not stand as a reliable means of conferring art status. So we must move on.

Art and Aesthetic Experience

So far we have skimmed through the essential theories of art that deal with the qualities of the work and its relation to the artist. From another angle, we could simply say that art is something which is created with the intention to produce aesthetic experience. We could argue that there is something special about the experience which art offers, and that we should call anything art, which offers and is intended to offer that experience.

That intention to afford aesthetic experience need not be primary: it may coexist with, say, religious or political intentions. But the notion of intention separates art from nature, a problem that occurred with our consideration of significant form in the formalist theory.

Again, this seems a probable scenario, provided we can agree what an aesthetic experience is. We cannot say that it is the experience of art, for then our theory would be circular. Given that we may be able to successfully argue that magical performance affords this kind of experience, let us consider a couple of versions of what aesthetic experience might be. We shall think of them as the *content-orientated account* and the *affect-orientated account*.

The first, content-orientated account, deals with the properties of a work, which can be sorted under the headings of unity (coherence), diversity and intensity. Attending to these properties amounts to an

aesthetic experience of a work. In effect, this account says what the aesthetic experience "contains." While this may often describe our experience of an artwork, it does not seem to relate to the appreciation of magic, unless one is a fellow magician attending to the technical aspects of another's performance. This is because the magical experience is not about attending to and considering aspects of a performance in a detached manner, rather it is about the raw, emotional involvement of an audience in a certain type of theatrical experience. It is not about standing back and appreciating qualities of the effect.

What of the affect-orientated account? This describes the type of experience which aesthetic experience is, rather than saying what it should contain. It describes it classically as being "marked by the disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation of any object of awareness whatsoever for its own sake alone." Disinterested attention means that we do not have other motives in attending to the work, and do not ask if it is morally correct: rather we attend to it on its own terms. Sympathetic attention means allowing oneself to play by the artwork's rules: such as accepting in an opera that people might sing the same lines over and over again to each other or that someone might fall immediately in love with a woman of such elephantine stature. Contemplation, interestingly for magic, is an active exercise of the mind to bring together possibly conflicting stimuli to form a coherent whole. However, it is necessary that this type of attention and contemplation exist for its own enjoyment, rather like the enjoyment of playing a chess match regardless of who wins.

I am not convinced that this describes the experience of magic, but does it hold as a reliable means of conferring art status? Well, no it doesn't. Dealing with the content-orientated account, there are

works which purposefully avoid the aesthetic properties of unity, diversity and intensity, such as Warhol's eight-hour shot of the Empire State Building called *Empire*. It draws our attention instead to presuppositions we have about film: it has a quite different agenda from eliciting the classic aesthetic response. As regards the affect-orientated account, it is the case that plenty of artworks may have an aim to rouse an audience to protest or to change aspects of their lives. This is clearly opposed to the idea of disinterested contemplation. And our demonic figures mentioned earlier, designed to ward off danger, were not made with the intention of producing that type of contemplation. The type of artwork known as a 'readymade,' such as Duchamp's *Fountain*, which is simply a urinal on display, has an ironic quality about it, which renders it provocative of aesthetic experience *because* it is displayed as art, not vice-versa. This absolutely turns the aesthetic definition of art on its head.

In that way, this account of aesthetic experience is too narrow to stand as a means of conferring art status, but in other ways it is too broad. I delight in those complicated Jules-Vernian espresso machines which one sees in the better department stores, with their exciting array of chrome knobs and levers which would almost entice me to spend the three-quarter of a million pounds on one, were it not for the fact that for me, strong coffee leads to a bumpy ride and occasional derailment on the tummy-train to bottom-land. I can appreciate these sparkling wonders of design with all that disinterested and sympathetic contemplation and attention, but coffee machines, mass-produced and sold in stores, are not art.

Besides, it is clear that the experience of a spectator of a magic effect that might be art is not going to be as detached as the aesthetic definition demands, unless that spectator is a fellow magician

merely admiring technique. But even then, it is surely rare that he will be watching with no other motivation than to marvel at and consider the artistry of the performer. And it is not just the case with magic that the response of the viewer will not be restricted to an aesthetic one. Art may provoke any number of cognitive, emotional and moral experiences: to restrict the experience of art to an aesthetic one is missing too much. Unable to stand as a conclusive definition of art, we need not be concerned that magic does not provoke this kind of response.

Against Definition

So far, no attempt to define art has proved satisfactory. Far from being a meaningless meander, it alerts us to the limitations of most arguments about art. Unconsciously or otherwise, most people when talking about whether something is or is not art, base their argument upon a definition which can be shown to be far too exclusive, inclusive, or both. It starts to seem fundamentally wrong to try and define art by means of a theorem, especially given the forever changing nature of art and what passes as such. It also means that we must be a little sceptical of writers such as Maskelyne and Sharpe who openly begin their discussions of magic and art on a definition of what art consists of. For the presumptions made by the writers of that time are now clearly inappropriate given the role of art today. Yet we still need to decide whether we can confer art status to magic or any other claimant, for in making that decision, we ascertain how we should respond to it. Should we attempt to interpret the work? Should we explore its aesthetic properties? How much attention should we give it?

It was precisely the rise of the avant-garde, which caused art theory to break with forever trying to come up with a conclusive definition of art. The first major school of thought to form was that of the Neo-Wittgensteinians, who took art to be an "open concept," in which new conditions and cases will constantly arise, rendering it, according to a frequently-cited Neo-Wittgensteinian, Morris Weitz, "logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties." Instead of attempting to reduce art to a theorem, this approach looks for "family resemblances" between accepted, paradigmatic art and the work that is claiming art status. Avoiding the idea of definition, it merely asks us to compare what we are seeing with what we know art to be from previous examples. Therefore if a claimant for art status resembles something previously accepted as art, then we decide that it is indeed art. Even something very new and revolutionary will have recognisable qualities – irony, perhaps – which can be found in previous works.

This may seem a wiser path to take. Rather than limiting ourselves to a condition for art, we engage in an active process of comparison, and judge accordingly. This, I believe, is the key to our problem, but the neo-Wittgensteinian approach is still not quite right. The example of Duchamp's *Fountain* (the ordinary urinal on display as art) causes problems with the idea of 'family resemblances,' for according to this notion, every other urinal of similar design would be art. It is of course not the urinal itself, but the fact that it is displayed as art, which gives it its value: it makes us question what we are prepared to accept as art and rather importantly (and I shall return to this point), *makes us look at urinals a little differently*. The fact that this sounds so ridiculous is precisely the point. There is a further problem, in that the notion of 'family resemblances' presupposes a family: some context, which validates those resemblances and provides a history of features. However, we would not decide

whether a child belonged to a family by its features, rather we would notice any physical resemblances once we know the family to which it belongs. In other words, the notion only has relevance if we presuppose that the claimant already belongs to the 'family': i.e. if it is already an artwork. The notion therefore is in danger of circularity: it is not quite accurately formulated to provide a satisfactory approach to looking at a work.

But we are close to a reliable model for understanding how we decide a piece to be art.

Conclusions: How We Define Art

Before dealing with the specifics of magic in the hope of answering the question of whether or not it can be art, I think we have arrived at a point where we can offer a safe model for deciding what is or is not an artwork. Unlike previous writers on the subject, I do not have the faith in any definitional theory of art to lay out a simple theorem in a few lines before talking about Great Conjuring and Profound Styles.

Let me say instead that art is a set of historical narratives. It is a story made up of different threads: a story which has twisted, lunged and broken away from itself over the years, a tale punctuated by moments of revolution and mutiny. It is a story that has come to define periods of history, and to be a cultural looking-glass and a record of the flux and aspirations of humanity. Any new piece of art adds to the story if we decide to include it.

How do we decide? We look at the new piece and see if it has relevance to that story. We see if it continues a thread or an argument already raised, or develops a previous argument: whether it reflects acknowledged 'art regards.' We take these regards and trace them back as threads through the story of art and see whether they have relevance today. Perhaps they will be relevant in that they may overthrow previous presumptions. But now that art is so concerned with raising questions and challenging an audience at some level, we can see how a piece stands up in light of those questions and challenges, and test its relevance for a contemporary audience.

This process is active: it is a dialogue of sorts. Also, we stress that the artistic aims referred to by identifying narratives are 'live' and recognised. Therefore a holiday snapshot of a landscape is not art, although a nineteenth-century painting of the same landscape is (another problem for the notion of 'family resemblances'): and rather than indulge in semantic arabesques to arrive at necessary and sufficient conditions that allow for that difference and others like it, we simply see that the photograph has no relevance to the prevailing aims of art. Although the appreciation of verisimilitude *is* a recognised art regard, it is no longer enough *on its own* to qualify as a relevant and live artistic aim. On the other hand, we may decide that a watercolour of the same landscape painted today may indeed be art, but we would not deem it as having any real relevance. We can accept Duchamp's *Fountain* without worrying about what to do with other urinals, for we can trace the issue it raises ("what is art?") back through various works to the cubists' agenda. It was *relevant* to the story at its time. This approach presupposes a reciprocal understanding between artists and audience, and avoids the charge of circularity, for we are not attempting to provide a definition.

This certainly seems the most plausible model on offer. All attempts to provide a definition of art through the ages have failed in the light of avant-garde art. Yet we continue happily to confer art status to works, so clearly the apparent difficulty in theory is not reflected in practice: something must be wrong in our attempts to theorise. The notion of art as a historical narrative provides a solution to that paradox.

It also seems the most true-to-life option. When we see a new work, and stare nonplussed at a woman undergoing perpetual surgery and calling herself art, we may struggle to wonder how, on the surface of things, such activity may fall into any recognised category of art. But an awareness of art issues and acknowledged art regards of the day will provide the necessary information to understand why it has relevance and is accepted by the art-world as valid.

Magic and Art

We can look at the theoretical history of art and find ways of making magic relevant to each major defining set of criteria. Magic *imitates* supernatural feats, as Maskelyne noted, and in the same way it *represents* them. Also, magic can be an *expression*: an intended transmission to an audience of an individualised emotion experienced by the magician and clarified through action. It can be viewed as *form*: it can be designed to exhibit significant form, and it can have content and form which relate in a satisfyingly appropriate manner. Perhaps we could even crowbar the experience of magic into the *aesthetic definition*, and validate the performance there.

All this is possible, and all this means that the performers of the day could have defended their work as art. But each one of them would have been proclaiming from their particular chapter in the story. Now that the story has moved on, we cannot accept their justifications. We must instead make sure that what we do has relevance to that story. Magic may indeed be imitation, but that is no longer relevant as a regard.

What, then, can magic offer that is relevant to our current chapter in the developing story of art? Well, we could take any conjuror and place him in a beautiful Swindon art gallery as an exhibit and have him perform rope magic. It would not be at all dissimilar to putting a urinal on display. People would pass by, seeing something which is not normally art and question its relevance. But we would be asking them to reflect on the nature of art, which is not the purpose of magic. A magician exhibited thus would not be transmitting wonder, which is part of the purpose of what he must do. Here, we would be provoking the kind of disinterested and sympathetic consideration associated with the aesthetic response. The art would not come from the magic itself: only the placing of a performance in a certain context. It might be art, if a little outdated, but would not answer our question.

The fact is, magic is weighed down by its associations with vaudeville and its general practice. It is not associated with performance art in the same way that, say, street theatre is: it is inherently very old-fashioned in that regard. There is nothing inherent in the *form* of magic to make it demand attention as a possible art candidate. The notion of deception does also not bode well with the idea of modern art regards: the production and enjoyment of illusion was very much part of the Victorian agenda. Therefore the nature of magic as deception also counts against magic

having any artistic relevance. The same is to be said for wonder. Much as we talk about it as the supreme artistic aim of magical performance, the fact is that the production of wonder is an outdated *art* regard that reached its lovely height in the nineteenth century. Therefore, if we do nothing but promote wonder, we may be doing what magic does best, but are not providing relevant art. It is the equivalent of the work of a local landscape painter, painting pretty pictures that would have been relevant art at one point in history but which are now pretty poor in substance. We will at best be producing what Sharpe calls 'Formal Art': art built according to a conventional formula. Even if we provide it in his Profound Style, we will still be producing something unable to be taken seriously as art. It may still be something of value, if we believe that wonder has an inherent value (as we must do as magicians), but it will be irrelevant to art. The production of wonder is no longer a concern.

It is a question of finding out what does lie at the heart of magic that is relevant to *what art is about today*. For me, and the artists to whom I speak, one major role of contemporary art is to make the audience leave the viewing and *look differently at things*. In other words, to challenge perception and preconception. This is something which Duchamp's readymades, Cage's *4' 33,"* and magic all have in common. It is here, and not in the concept of wonder, that we find the potential for magic to be relevant to art. Wonder might be the vehicle for that challenge to thought and perception, for it is the peculiar product of magic, but in itself is far from enough.

It must therefore be our task as magical artists to use our performances to challenge the perceptions of our audiences. This may be very modest: a person, upon having seen Duchamp's *Fountain* sees another urinal and perceives it differently, and a function has been served with that moment of consideration.

Similarly, a person looks differently at an ordinary teaspoon after witnessing a spoon-bending effect, which left him thoughtful and a little less sure of his way of seeing things.

How do we ensure this? Firstly, it is in the nature of genuine art that one does not work to a formula: instead, that each piece is created from scratch. So any ideas I have here are merely part of my set of preferences for achieving this worthwhile goal.

By concentrating upon this capacity of magic to give our audiences a more considered view of the nature of perception, and to make them wonder a little more *at themselves and the world* rather than merely to provide them with that emotion as a directionless state, we give our magic a meaning and an aim. This is a meaning inherent in magic and therefore if art is borne from this, it is the art of magic itself. I am not concerned here with the use of magic as a theatrical vehicle for a separate vision. A very talented and respected magician, whom I know well, staged recently a piece of theatre which explored issues close to him, and he used magic as a presentational device to do so. Whilst the result was without doubt a piece of art, the art was that of the theatre, and not that of magic. He might just as well have chosen mime or dance to explore the theme of the drama: it was theatre first, and the magic was subordinated to that first aim. I concern myself here only with whether magical performance can in and of itself be art.

Penn and Teller explore through their magic an agenda of rock'n'roll scepticism towards new-ageism, and in doing so also manifest a vision wider than magic itself. Their theatricality also lends itself to sometimes subordinating the magic to dramatic situation, but it is an overarching vision for magic, which governs their performance in my eyes. And this artistically relevant message to consider yourself

and the world more carefully is close behind the debunking program.

I think it absolutely necessary if magic is to stand as art that it provoke the audience member to consider some things differently after the performance. That may consist of him seeing potential in everyday things, or even to develop an awareness of aspects of his own perceptual apparatus and psychological make-up. If it does not make him feel a little differently about something after the performance, then I cannot imagine it is doing the job that art should.

It is for this reason that if I am to perform an effect with a very ordinary object such as a coin, that I do not indulge in using that coin as a metaphorical device, causing it to vanish and reappear while I tell an inflated story about birth, life, death and rebirth. Such presentational frames are, as I have said, ridiculously out to proportion to the effect and render the performance pretentious and the props even more obviously ordinary. The spectator would not walk away and see wondrous potential in a coin or question his perception of it, rather he would leave feeling oddly patronised. Instead, if I were to use such a commonplace object, I would more often begin by placing it right before them and giving it space... as if it were some rare talisman. I would provoke interest in it while not pretending it is anything more than a common coin. Yet I would *act* as if it were very important. If it then vanished of its own accord as I picked it up, and reappeared, say, back on the table, we now have a situation where an ordinary object has become fascinating. Then I leave and one day they sit with a coin of theirs and look at it differently, turning it over in their own hands and wondering what they saw. I have, hopefully, made something interesting out of nothing... and this is a good starting-point for creating a piece of art.

Beyond this consideration, the individual performer will have his own vision, and in the way of all artists, (to paraphrase Dali) each will find the personal quest of the other incomplete or daft. But where magic stimulates thought it provokes intelligently, and can be genuinely challenging. It is in that direction that we must push ourselves, even if only a little, for the creation of wonder or sentiment alone is no longer enough.

Now, it may not be the preference of the performer to provoke progressive thought on the part of the audience member. A magician my be entirely concerned with the transmission of wonder or fun and ensuring its success as elegantly as possible. These are noble aims and I have no quarrel with them. My only issue here is their severe limitation as relevant art issues.

Similarly, it may be the intention of the performer to provoke such thought and challenge in that way, but he may fail. He may have every artistic intention, but lack the performing skills to pull it off. This is simply bad art, the equivalent of those dreadful pictures of weeping clowns and hydrocephalic, bubble-blowing children. Bad art is still art, however much we cringe at it. Poor execution is unfortunate but does not simply disqualify the piece. So far, this book has been concerned with my vision of how to do the job well, and how to make sure that the performance is congruent and convincing. Sharpe says, in *Good Conjuring*:

> "It is by attention to details that Fine Art is produced. Rough or clumsy work clashes with that term's etymology, which implies graceful, delicate and painstaking *finish*."

I would qualify the use of the words 'graceful and delicate.' I do believe that artistic work should be deeply elegant, but this is an

elegance which resonates at a more profound level than the surface presentation. A clown's work may be art, but it may appear comically clumsy and inept. However, that apparent clumsiness will be the accurately engineered result of elegant consideration and the deft application of skill. The grace and delicacy of which Sharpe speaks are too close to his ideas of the Profound Style, which he sees as necessary for the production of Fine Art. Those qualities as prerequisites of artworks are a little old-fashioned now in an age where something as graceless and indelicate as lavatorial apparatus can count as art.

Consideration of these points leads me to the conclusion that the performer is best recommended not to try and produce art, but to strive instead to produce original work which challenges an audience and provokes thought and a shift in perception. Similarly, he is recommended to find his personal vision and seek to clarify it in his work. In many ways, the process of performing becomes a way for him to become more acquainted with that vision himself: that is, the motivation for performance can be primarily to understand better what he wishes to express. If these are his major concerns, and if he pays attention to the level of detail, application of skill, depth of thought and elegance of execution, and if he never loses sight of the fact that his work has its very existence in that dynamic vision, then he may be elevating the craft of magic to an art – all that one could ask.

It may be that my approach to art sounds harsh. It may be that you would want the wealth of nauseating new-age presentations of magic (which generally show the artistic sensibility of a six-year old) and the pretentiously sombre and self-indulgent close-up 'dramatic' presentations to both qualify as art. You may desire this simply because they break away from trivialising magic. That may be true,

but they can also be deeply insulting both to an audience and to magic in quite another way. Esoteria should not be mistaken for profundity. The true work of art will reveal ideas, not revel in them.

I hope that my thoughts on the subject provide a new way of considering the question of magic and art. I believe it to be the case that we now have to look not so much at what magic or art *is*, but what it *does*. Once we identify what magic should do to render it as worthwhile and worthy of attention as possible, then we must set about making it do that according to our personal vision of performance. I do not mind whether or not what a magician does is art, and I should not concern myself too much with trying to produce it. I can only follow and develop my own passions and set about transmitting a vision to my audience in a way that is personal to me and which, with the sting of clarity, might challenge them to think differently. I minimise any conscious borrowing from other performers but am aware of influences which support my work, and I seek to remove messages from my performance that obfuscate the real meaning I would transmit. I can only do my very best to be true to that aim, and strive to improve and better understand what I wish to say with what I do. And at moments along that line, I get close to how I feel it should be, and there's nothing I know like it on earth.

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Richard McDougall. Thank you for your work and vision – I am indebted. Don't ever tell anyone.

Christian Rutherford. Thank you for our discussions – you are a very delightful friend to have.

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Richard Hatch and Charlie Randall. For printing thousands, perhaps billions of these and selling them to everyone.

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Jonathan Goodwin. Thanks for our chats which led to all sorts of ideas which I later claimed as my own.

Michael Vine. My manager. Extraordinary. For those who know him, no explanation is necessary. For those who do not know him, no explanation is possible.

Mr. Figaro Polly Parrot. For being such a good boy.

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