MAGICISMS
By Duane Laflin

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LAFLIN MAGIC
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About Duane Laflin

The popularity and effectiveness of the Laflin approach to magic is evidenced by the fact that Duane, assisted by his wife Mary, has performed on five continents, in many countries of the world, and in forty-seven of the fifty states in the USA. They have worked as full time professional magicians for nearly twenty years.

The public appreciates their magic. Magicians like it too. Duane has lectured for the prestigious Magic Circle in London, England on two occasions. He has lectured three times at the famous Magic Castle in Hollywood, California along with performing on its Palace Stage. The Laflins have performed and lectured for most of the major magic conventions in the USA and been featured at conventions of magicians in Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, England, Norway, Denmark, Austria, Mexico, and South Africa.

From 1991 till 1996 Duane was the international President of the International Fellowship Of Christian magicians. For many years he has served as chaplain to the International Brotherhood Of Magicians.

At the present Duane and Mary have the “Montana Wonder Theater” in Libby, Montana where they do full-scale illusion shows during summer months and special holiday productions during the year. When not in Montana they have a home near Pigeon Forge, Tennessee that they use as a base for lecture and performance tours.
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MAGICISMS

Introduction

Generally the three letters in ism are used as a suffix to indicate a doctrine, theory, or way of doing things. Examples of this are conservatism, sexism, socialism, colloquialism, Catholicism, etc. Magicism is a word coined for this book to suggest a collection of principles and guidelines that compose a doctrine of doing magic well.

A number of years ago there was a popular book in the business world called, “THE ONE MINUTE MANAGER”. The book was a hit because it offered a series of short essays, each of which could be read in about a minute, which would provide food for thought and inspiration to those trying to succeed in the competitive world of business. I suppose it could be said that the book contained “managerisms.”

“MAGICISMS” is designed to be a kind of “one minute manager” for magicians and other entertainers. It is a collection of instructional and motivational concepts, written in brief form, to help performers maintain and improve their focus on being the best that they can be when on stage. It may take more than a minute to read each “magicism,” but it won’t take long. What may take long is the thinking process “MAGICISMS” is designed to stimulate. If a reader is serious about achieving success as an entertainer, he or she will ponder over the identified and explained concepts. Action should be taken in the form of practice
and experimentation. The pages of this concise book call for extended application.

The source of these magicisms is listening and observation. Some of what is written comes from what I have heard others say. When this is the case, every effort has been made to give proper credit where it is due. Most of what is written in this book comes from personal analysis. Over the course of many years on stage I have tried hard to define why some things work and others do not. It has been important to me to go beyond “what to do” to understand “why to do.” I think the “why” in performing is much more important than the “how.”

As I have drawn conclusions, I have written them in my notes. The notes are the basis for this book. Surely I am not the only one to notice the things I have noticed and to conclude the things I have concluded. If my thoughts are accurate, others will be aware of the same things. This means it is doubtful that I will write anything new or different from what others have already written. However, I hope the way I state things, and the way I have tried to reduce lessons from broad experience into potent capsules of thought, will be beneficial.
MAGICISM #1. Everybody Wants To Be, But Not Everyone Wants To Become

I recently heard a well known entertainer jokingly say, “After working hard in show business for twenty years, I finally became an overnight success!” Behind his statement was the truth that, although only recently had he become famous and a commercial success, he had been working at his art for a long time.

A genuine “overnight success” is a rare thing. If it does happen it usually has more to do with luck and extremely fortunate timing than it does talent and ability. This “overnight success” is then likely to become a “one hit wonder” because luck does not last and great timing quickly turns into “just another day.”

Think about it: How many overnight successes remain successful? Those who reach the top of their trade and stay there are normally those who have paid their dues in the form of disciplined learning, hard work and perseverance.

This means, if a person wants to achieve success as a magician or other kind of entertainer, the person must be committed to the process that leads to the goal. Think about it this way: It is one thing to say, “I’d love to be a really great piano player.” It is altogether another thing to say, “I am willing to practice hour upon hour, day after day, in order to learn to play the piano.” Similarly, it is one thing to want to be a terrific athlete, yet another thing to be willing to spend long hard hours on the track and in the gym to make it happen. Wanting something is vastly different from working for something.

Occasionally motivational speakers say things
like, “If you believe you can do it, you can do it.” That is not true. Attached to belief and desire there must also be action. It is better to say, If you believe you can, and you actually work toward the goal in a reasonable and consistent manner, then you can!”

Having the dream of being a great magician will get you nowhere…unless it is coupled with determination to work at being a great magician. The critical question is, “Will you study your craft, practice your skills, rehearse your shows, and invest quality effort in mastering your chosen field of performance?” It is the dream plus the determination that makes great magic. If you are not willing to become, which involves time, effort, and a growth process, then you cannot expect to be.
MAGICISM #2. The Difference Between An Amateur And A Professional Is Details

The first time I attended a magic convention I was surprised by something I saw on stage. The curtain opened and there stood a man next to a small table which had on it a set of ABC blocks. The ABC blocks appeared to be identical to the version I owned. I thought to myself, “Why is that guy up there on stage while I am out in the audience; when I own the same prop he owns and can do the same trick he does?”

Then the man began his act. I quickly understood why he was on stage and I was not. His timing was perfect. His patter was clever. Everything about him, including how he stood and how he moved, was interesting and artistic. It was clear he was a true professional.

This was when I began to understand the difference between being an owner of props and being a real magician. It is fair to say that there are many who have tricks yet they are not magicians.

A true magician does not just posses a prop, he knows how to present it. He knows how to make people care about what he does with it.

He gives attention to costuming, body language, and facial expressions. He thinks before and after the trick to consider details such as how he will pick the prop up and then, when the trick is finished, put it down again. He approaches stage performance with the understanding that, not just the tricks themselves, but everything the audience sees and hears should be
appealing and impressive.

This is why he is a “pro”. The amateur thinks that using a prop and making it work properly is the magic. He assumes that if he fools people with it he will be successful. The professional knows that props are simply means for showcasing character and entertainment skills. He knows that, more than fooling people, magic is about making people that are “fooled” glad it happens. His goal is to create a pleasing and wonderful experience.

By the way; the magician with the ABC blocks that I first saw so many years ago was Billy McComb. As years went by he became a friend. It was a privilege to know him and be able to learn from him.
MAGICISM #3. Don’t Do It Just Because You Can

I don’t know whom I personally first heard say this, but I have heard several credit the remark to Lance Burton. His words were, “More important than what you put into an act is what you take out of it.” This is reference to the fact that often a performance is weakened by having too much or unnecessary things in it.

An example is the matter of backpalming and reproducing the same cards. This is an impressive feat, but it does not need to be done again and again for several minutes. Since it is such a difficult sleight to learn, and so much time goes into perfecting it, those who can do it often conclude it merits having a lot of time during the act. The thinking is, “Something that took me this long to learn certainly is worth more than a brief spot in my show!”

That kind of thinking will keep a performer from achieving greatness. How long something takes to learn and how hard something is to do has no correlation to how long it should be shown to an audience. A grand illusionist must know that even though a trick cost thousands of dollars, if he only can get two minutes out of it, he should not try to get three. So a sleight of hand artist must know that even though a move took him years to learn, if it only needs to be done once in the act it should not be done more than that.

It is difficult to do. It is vital that we do it. We must look at our performances and ask ourselves, “When am I doing too much?” and “What things am I doing that the
audience does not seem to care enough about?"

When I was young in magic I thought the fact that I had a two hour illusion show was something to brag about. Looking back on that show now, I believe it was not a two hour show. It was only a show that I made last two hours. It may not have contained an hour’s worth of magic that was really worth showing an audience.

These days my interest is not in the length of the show, it is in the quality of the show. The question is not “How much time can I do?” or “How many minutes can I get out of it?” The question is, “How can I make every moment in the show super strong?”

This is why show business experts recommend that magicians have directors. We all need someone to help us get the audience point of view...and we need someone to help us understand that some of the stuff that we think is great, should be changed or completely taken out of the show.

Note: I don’t believe in putting a trick into a show just to fill time or extend things. If it is in the show at all, it must be viewed as being there for the purpose of providing great entertainment.
MAGICISM #4. Know Thy Audience

A young man who wanted to become known as a great magician did a show in a church. His opening routine was done to a heavy metal song with what he thought was the latest and most cool sound around. He assumed this music would convey the message that he also was the latest and most cool thing around. Instead the music alienated the audience. Some people immediately walked out, others sat and frowned, yet others smiled politely while obviously thinking, “This is not good.” The young man did not get invited back to the church nor did he get any letters of recommendation from the church. His mistake was failure to take into account the fact that many church people do not like heavy metal music.

If the young man continues to use that kind of music it is his prerogative, but he must realize it will limit him to a smaller market (others who like heavy metal music). He also has the responsibility of informing audiences about what they will be in for if they decide to book him. Although he has an intent desire to book a lot of shows, he must not try to book himself into places where his show will flop.

The young man needs to learn that you cannot entertain people by presenting them with something they do not like. Must one be a theatrical genius to realize that if there are things in the show that people don’t like, it is doubtful they will like the show? It is a matter of common sense. In order to connect with people and have a performance, which realizes broad success, the key elements in the performance must have broad appeal.

The core of the matter is we are not performing for
ourselves; we are performing for the audience. If the show is only about us, then if the music and other things in the show make us happy, it is good enough. (We may never get booked again and be miserable failures, but we will be entertaining ourselves). If the show is not about us, then we must look at things differently.

The concept applies to more than music. The magicians’ costume should be selected on the basis of what will help him or her come across most effectively. There is a tendency for magicians to choose their own comfort or just follow their own preference rather than choosing garments based on what best relates to the crowd. How assistants dress should be based on appeal to the audience. The question is not, “Do they look good?” It is, “Is the apparel attractive yet appropriate for this group?” The kind of humor used should be based on appeal to the audience. It is another place for performers to commonly err. They fail to see that what they think is funny does not come across to the crowd as being funny.

Great performers identify and understand their market. They also know what makes audiences happy and build their shows around it.
MAGICISM #5. If They Don’t Know How It Is Done They Don’t Know How It Is Done

One night, after a lecture to magicians, a member of the local magic club said to me “I have been doing magic for sixteen years and never used a change bag.” He said this with pride. It appeared he thought I would be impressed that he was so clever and skillful he had never needed to resort to using this common prop. I was not impressed. My mental reaction was, “If a carpenter told me he had been building houses for sixteen years, but never once resorted to using a hammer I would assume he was some kind of nut case. People who refuse to use the common and proven tools of their trade aren’t being clever, they are being stupid.”

I think the man was caught up in what might be called the MAGIC CLUB MENTALITY where the goal has become impressing other magicians rather than doing good magic for the public. Those who are afflicted with this mentality tend to think that the proof of a great trick is found in the fact that other magicians don’t know how it is done. It may be a silly trick, but if the method is unknown to magicians and then when revealed if the method impresses other magicians, there is much enthusiasm about it.

The problem in this is magic is not about methods. It is about effects. The public should not know if a difficult sleight of hand maneuver is employed or if it is just a matter of a bag with a false side. All they are to know is that something has happened which cannot be explained. If they are mystified, they are mystified.
So in a general way it really does not matter how you get the job done. The issue is getting the job done. If there is an easy way to do it, why do it the hard way? Should it bother you to accomplish a great trick with a super simple tool? Not at all.

I do believe it is important to develop skills as a magician. There is value in mastering difficult moves. The time will come when such moves will be the best way to do what needs to be done. It is also true that you should not use the same few tools again and again for the same audience. Therefore it is wise to know many ways for creating effects. The point is not that we should be lazy. It is that we should be smart.

If a change bag serves your purpose, use a change bag. If a magician comes to your show and knows your secret it does not matter. He is not the one who has booked you and he is not the one who will give you the check.

Note: There are times when the public has become aware of our secrets. If there is a chance your audience knows about the change bag, then you will need to use something different. Remember, the purpose is to create mystery. The important thing is not the method involved; it is the fact that you get it done.
MAGICISM #6. Have Mentors, Go Beyond Them

Advice often heard in the magic world is, “Be original! Take that routine and make it your own! Don’t copy other people!”

There is a problem with such advice. It can discourage the idea of having a mentor. More than an instructor, a mentor is a guide and model. A mentor does not just provide information; he or she shows a way of doing things that students are likely to copy. It is not hard to spot the influence of Slydini in those who studied under him. So with the Chavez School Of Magic, it is not uncommon for those who have taken the course to have what others may say is a “Chavez” style.

This is not a stigma. It is not wrong or bad to have a kind of training that is identifiable. A number of years ago I had a young man travel with me for the summer as an apprentice. Then, when he began to do shows on his own, he heard people saying, “We sure can see Duane Laflins’ influence in you.” Rather than believing this to be a positive thing, the young man was embarrassed and began to change his style so he would not be viewed as doing things like I do. He made a concentrated effort to not be what he had been trained to be. The result was a time of floundering. Abandoning his frame of reference made him unsure and confused.

Eventually he got back on track. A huge help in getting back on track was the following comment made by a Japanese magician. The young man was told, “It is a compliment to know that your teacher can be seen in you. Be glad. Now, become your own person by
continuing in the direction your teacher taught you to go until you have gone beyond it. That is where you find your own success.”

American magicians may not be aware of the fact that in Japan the term sensei applies to more than martial arts. It is about having a respected teacher in any art. The Japanese desire to have a sensei may be a reason why they often excel in the world of magic. They see the need to earn the right to become a performer on their own. They believe this right is earned by first subjecting themselves to the teaching of someone else. In their culture it is considered an honor to be trained by a master.

I’ve heard the saying applied to the military world and the business world. “Great leaders must first be great followers.” I think it also can be applied to the magic world. There is much value in being schooled by those who have experience and expertise that we have not yet acquired. We should be grateful to have their touch on our careers.

So what about “being original” and “doing it your own way”? Having solid role models and letting them teach us how to do things right and well is an important step along the path to self-discovery. Not only is it possible to find our own way of doing things while standing upon foundations built by others, it is the best way to do it.
MAGICISM #7. You Don’t Have To Be Ignorant To Be Original

Sometimes I wonder how certain clichés used by magicians get started. Who is it that first said, “When you purchase a magic trick, throw away the routine that comes with it and decide on your own how to use it!”

I have heard this a number of times and will be direct to say I think it is stupid. That routine, (assuming it is provided by a qualified performer), is the best way a working performer has found to present the trick. It may not be the best way for you to present the trick, but you should at least consider what this other person has already discovered. You may discover that this presentation offered for your use really is the best way for you to do the trick as well. It is hard to beat Ken Brooke’s multiplying bottle routine. It is hard to improve on the standard patter for the six bill repeat. Most magicians who try to come up with something different than these classic presentations will not develop something that is better. They will instead come up with something that is weak and silly.

When David Copperfield decides to put a new effect into his show does he insist on starting purely from scratch? Does he say, “I do not want to know what anyone else has done with this illusion and I do not want to read what anyone has written about it?” No. He does the opposite. He wants to know everything about it. He collects everything available in print. He has advisors and consultants who tell him all they know about it. This wide range of material gives him ingredients that will be combined in his own way for a version of the effect that
will definitely become his own.

Most working pros do it. They research things they want to put into their act or show. A key part of the research is examining what others have already said and what others have already done. If this is what the pros do, why are amateurs told to close their eyes to what is there?

Would not it be better to tell someone with limited experience and knowledge to, “Always read the instructions and accompanying routines. Ponder the ideas. Try some of the suggestions. Learn from what others have already done?” Then, after telling them to educate themselves about what they have in their hands, they should also be challenged about the importance of putting their own identity and personality into the performance.

It is important for magicians to understand the mistake of directly copying someone else. I agree that it is foolish and wrong to mimic other performers. My disagreement is with those who think that the way we teach people to “be themselves” is by advising them to ignore the contributions of others. One does not have to be ignorant to be original. People like Ali Bongo, Johnny Thompson, and Max Maven are wonderfully original. They also are well read and extremely well informed. It may be that the most original minds in magic are the same minds that have been most educated about magic.

Go ahead and read the routines that others offer. It can inspire and direct your own creativity.
MAGICISM #8. Promotion And Publicity
Gets Them Through The Door Only
Once

In the 1970’s a new orange soda soft drink hit the market. It came on the scene with a wonderful advertising campaign featuring beautiful women and handsome men in neon orange swimsuits riding surfboards on big waves. The message was, “Want a refreshing and thrilling experience? Think orange as in our brand of orange soda!”

I was so impressed by the ads that the first time I saw this soft drink in a store I bought it. I never bought it again. Why? Because I did not like it! The product did not live up to the advertising. Apparently I was not the only one who did not like it. Within a few months it was off the store shelves and, as far as I know, within a year or so it was off the market.

The moral in this is you can get business through promotion and publicity, but to stay in business you must have a quality product. To translate this concept to being a magician, “Advertising leads them to buy a ticket once, but it is the show itself that brings them back again.”

There may have been a time when it was hard to come by great promotional and publicity material, so performers focused more on having a good reputation and getting solid references. They knew the show had to speak for itself. Now, with computer editing programs making it simple to create sharp video and great graphics on the desktop at home, it is possible for a novice performer to sell himself as the most amazing magician
to come on the scene in years.

I think it has reached the stage where it is a problem in magic. Unproven performers are promoting themselves far beyond their ability to deliver a good show. Clients hire these performers and then are disappointed. They say, “I won’t ever hire another magician.” I’ve heard it said and I know others have heard the same thing. People don’t want to use magicians because the one they hired in the past was supposed to be a world class pro, yet no one liked him. To them this means magicians are not good entertainers.

The truth is, the magician they used was not a world class pro. He just advertised himself as such. Because he could not live up to his advertising, he made a bad reputation for himself and took opportunities away from other magicians.

It is time we start telling those who want to know how to better market themselves, “The key issue is the value of your show. Before you worry about how to sell it, make sure it is worth selling!” The focus should be on making sure we perform in a way that people will want to experience more than once. Every magician should view it as a personal responsibility to see to it that his or her show is every bit as good as advertised. Ideally, we should be committed to having a show that is even better than advertised. It is the quality of our product that keeps us in business...and keeps the public happy to hire magicians.
MAGICISM #9. The Backdrop Should Make You Look Good

When we were in the retail magic business part of our line was backdrops. When customers were contemplating an investment in a backdrop they would usually ask us, “What color should I get?” We found that often they did not what a practical answer to that question. What they wanted was for us to name the color they had already decided they liked. They were hoping we would confirm their personal preference.

When we would give them an answer we posed it in the form of another question. We would ask, “What color is your costume?” It was surprising to see how this tended to confuse the customer. They thought we were switching subjects. They were talking backdrops and we were talking costumes. To clarify the matter we would explain how a decision about backdrop color should be based on costume color. It is not a good idea to have a red backdrop if you wear a red coat. It is not a good idea to have black backdrop if you wear all black. The concern is that the backdrop be a pleasing contrast to your apparel and props so that what you do as a performer will be showcased.

Time and time again we found people struggling with the idea that the backdrop they thought was prettiest or most appealing was not the best one for them. I remember a magician friend who was especially proud of a shiny backdrop made from silver Mylar streamers. He had purchased it for a low price and thought it looked wonderful on stage. It did. However, when he was in front of it this bright and busy backdrop it was hard for
people to focus on the props he was trying to show them. It may have worked as backing for a brief presentation, but as a set piece for a full show it was a disaster. It actually seemed to tire the eyes of those watching him. To his credit, he eventually realized it was a bad choice and got rid of it.

The principle in this is that the set of the show, especially the backdrop, is not there to look good on its own. It is there to make the performer look good. Your favorite color may not be the best color to have behind you. This applies to close-up pads as well. Don’t buy a blue one because you really like blue. Buy it because the things you use in your close-up act look best when done over blue. If they don’t look best over blue, get a different color (blue balls for the cup and balls trick are not easy to see when done over a blue close-up pad).

This does not mean we should have no concern about the background of our shows being attractive. We certainly do not want the background to look bad. It means we understand it is there to enhance, not distract or overshadow what the show is about.

Bottom line: If you are making decisions about color in backdrops, props, or set pieces think in terms of contrast and remember that the key question is not, “Does it look good?” The key question is, “Does it make me look good?”
MAGICISM #10. Words And Actions
Affect Logic, Music Affects Emotion

There are exceptions to this, but as a general rule,
music should be viewed as a tool for making people feel
what you are doing whereas words and actions make
them think about what you are doing. Music stirs
sentiment. It awakens passions. It touches the heart.
Talk and motions are for the mind.

Understanding this rule makes it easier to select
music for use in your show. The guide to follow when
looking for a song is, “How do I want people to feel when
they watch this routine?” If I want them excited, I find a
song that conveys excitement. If I am going for humor, I
find music with a light-hearted sound. The mood of the
song must match the mood I have in mind for the trick.

Since most magicians are not members of music
groups such as ASCAP or BMI, I recommend the use of
royalty free music. After purchasing such music, as you
listen to the songs think about them in terms similar to
what are used for Hollywood movies. Decide if the song
is ACTION/ADVENTURE or COMEDY or ROMANCE or
SUSPENSE/HORROR or DRAMA or DOCUMENTARY.
You might create a few more categories of your own
such as INTROSPECTIVE or WHIMSY. Put the songs in
categories where they fit. Then, when planning a new
show, go to the category of songs that fits the routine you
are working on. Suppose you want to open the show
with an exciting illusion such as the sword basket. You
would check out songs in the action/adventure category.
If you plan to close the show with a touching version of a
torn and restored paper heart, you would check out the
romantic and introspective categories. This is an easy way to organize your music and make good musical choices.

The fact that music does impact emotions is a key reason why it is good to use it. For the first ten years of my involvement with magic I hardly did anything with music. I avoided it because I really wasn’t sure how to use it. As well, it seemed like a bother to haul around equipment for playing the music. Then I got my first job in a small theme park and on the first day tried to do my act. I could not get people to stop and pay attention. They were so busy with their snacks, kids, and discussions about what to do next that they did not seem to realize I was even there. If they did realize I was there, they would not stop what they were doing to look at me.

Frustrated by this, I decided to stop talking (they weren’t listening anyway) and do some magic to music. I was amazed by the result. The music was like a signal that said, “Hey, the show is starting.” It quieted the crowd, put them in the mood to watch me, and from there on the show went great. It is fair to say that the music made them feel like the show was worth watching.

I’ve been using music ever since and now cannot imagine trying to perform without it. It is worth whatever it takes to play it, and it allows you to impact the audience in a complete manner; both on the emotional and logical level.
MAGICISM #11. Don’t Stand Behind The Table

Body language says a lot. The position of your body in relation to your props also can say a lot. A performer who stands behind a magic table that looks like a little pulpit and puts between himself and the audience an array of props on display is saying with his position, “Look at all this stuff I have to show you.” His physical situation is giving the message that he is a magician because he has all this equipment. A conclusion an audience may draw from this is that if they had the same equipment they would be magicians too. In other words, the props make the magic.

Do we want our audiences to think that we are not anything special? Do we want them to think that the only reason we can do magic is we have shopped in a magic store? I hope not!

It is better for the magician to stand in front of his table. The table should be back behind him a ways and even off to the side. This gives the message that the performer is what makes the magic. Magic happens because he (or she) is there, not because of the props. The props just happen to be what he picks up now and then to demonstrate the kind of things he is able to do.

Magic catalogs typically offer a variety of magic tables, which are decorated with rabbits, top hats, dragons, etc. There may have been a time when that kind of table was a good thing. With the exception of those who specialize in kid shows, (kids love fancy designs and colorful boxes), I think in our time fancy tables are not a good thing. Ideally, the table should be
something the public hardly notices. If they do notice it, it should only be by way of a passing observation. To say it simply: We don’t want them to look at our tables; we want them to look at us!

Pay attention to those who have achieved highest levels of success in magic. If they use a table at all, the table is usually just a simple box covered by a black drape. It is a table that blends in with stage settings and audiences tend to forget is there. Quite a few working pros don’t use tables at all. They have assistants bring out props at appropriate times and then take them away when the routine is finished.

Think about it: Amateurs tend to want to spread their magic all over the stage so audiences can see how much they have. Professionals rarely have anything in view apart from what they are using at the moment. What does the professional understand that the amateur does not? He or she knows that persons are more interesting than props. The show is about the magician, not the equipment.

Compromises have to be made on this matter. If you don’t have an assistant, some things and maybe everything will need to be preset on stage. If the stage is not adequate, props may have to be in view even though they aren’t being used. Situations are rarely ideal and we cannot always control the circumstance, but we can control what our tables look like and we can be conscious of the fact that it is the performer and not the props, which need to be center stage.
MAGICISM #12. Conclude Your Show With The Creation Of Good Will

What is better, to have the audience leave the show thinking you are great or to have your audience leave the show thinking, “I feel great!”

The answer is you should want them to leave feeling great. If they believe they had a great time, and feel really good about the experience they had with you, they are likely to believe you are great as well. The converse of this is not true. It is possible for people to leave a show thinking you are great yet also thinking they did not enjoy the show.

It can be compared to junior high school and the attitude most of a class would have toward the only student to score 100% on a test that everyone else nearly flunked. How did they feel about this student who showed his or her superiority? Did they have warm positive feelings and think, “I’m sure glad this super intelligent person is in our class. I want to be his friend?” Probably not. Instead they may have resented the fact that someone was there who seemed to be so much smarter than the rest of the class. There are times when people are forced to admit that a “know it all” or “show off” possesses excellent abilities while inwardly they wish that person did not exist.

Proving to our audiences how great we are can accomplish the same thing. It can convince people that we do have talent…and that they do not want to see us use it. (Why hang around someone who makes you feel inferior or inadequate?) This means they will not come back to our shows and they may advise others to stay
away. Some of the most skillful magicians I have ever seen cannot hold an audience because they have not yet figured out that great demonstrations of skill are not enough to make an audience happy.

So when it comes to the end of a show, we do not have to worry about closing with the largest, greatest, and most astonishing thing the audience has ever seen. Even if we could do that, it might not make our show popular. Rather we can work on closing our show with something that makes people feel good.

Kevin James does many amazing illusions. However, the close of his show is not built around someone being cut in half with a chainsaw and then restored nor is it the unbelievable transformation of a Charlie Chaplin doll into a real person. It is built around an old and simple trick known as “Snowstorm In China”. The way Kevin does it is original, beautiful, and emotional. He is alone on a chair with some paper and water. The effect he creates does not make people think, “How does he do it?” Instead it makes people think, “This is wonderful. I love it! I’m so glad I got to see him do it."

That should be our goal. People who leave a show thinking, “Wasn’t that fun!” are the same people who are likely to come back to the show again and bring friends with them. Work at closing your show with a “feel good” effect. (Sometimes your biggest and best trick can also be a “feel good effect”).

I may have come up with this phrase, but I am not sure. I could have heard it from someone else first. Who said it first does not matter. What does matter is the principle it states for those working on sleight of hand skills. The essence of the phrase is that the hand that has nothing must do something…while the hand that has something must do nothing.

The reason this needs to be said and explained is the fact that those who are learning sleight of hand technique commonly struggle with separating secret actions from displayed effect. They know which hand has a hidden object so this is the hand that has their attention. At the same time they disregard the hand that they know to be empty. This is a contradiction of thought that makes it hard to get away with the move. It is the empty hand that should get the attention and the non-empty hand that should be disregarded.

Magicians are to remember that they are actors before they are technicians. Sleight of hand is a tool; acting is what uses the tool. We must act like we really are doing what we want the audience to believe we are doing.

To make it simple: If we want the audience to believe we have just taken something into our left hand, this is the hand that should move. Once it supposedly holds something it should rise up higher than the other hand and be positioned in a manner that indicates, “This is the place! This is where it is! This is where you need
to look!” (People tend to look at what is moving or what is higher). The other hand, the one we know secretly does contain the object, should not move. The message about this hand is, “There is nothing here. No need to look at this hand, it has nothing and is doing nothing.” If it is a necessity to move the guilty hand (the hand with the hidden object), it should move slowly and casually as if the action is completely unimportant. Better yet, it should only move because it has a new and different thing to do such as picking up a wand.

Fundamentally it is a matter of confidence. Those who lack confidence are in a hurry to ditch a hidden object. They want to get it out of the way quickly and therefore suspiciously move the guilty hand. People look at what is moving so this hurried effort actually calls attention to what is supposed to be hidden. Relaxing is the key to avoiding suspicious movements. Forget that the hand is not empty and focus on the fact that the audience thinks it is empty. Since they think it is empty you can hold it still. Since you hold it still they won’t look at it. You can ditch the hidden object later on when no one is paying attention.

To do sleight of hand well a performer must think in terms of what the audience sees and not in terms of what he is doing.

Note: This is why practice in front of a mirror, which is recommended, can still be detrimental if not managed properly. Watching yourself can lead to thinking too much about your own actions and not enough about audience perspective.

This is about transitions. It is one of the things that distinguishes an amateur from a professional. The amateur has worked out a list of tricks he will do in the show. In his mind, having this list arranged means he is ready for the show. The professional knows that a list of tricks is not enough. There must also be a plan for how he will go from one trick to the next. He does not want to finish with sponge balls and then simply say, “And now for my next trick…the linking rings.” He wants to move from the sponge balls to the rings in a more interesting and entertaining manner.

Doing transitions well involves two things: the efficient use of time and placing entertainment into that time. The efficient use of time means there are no wasted moments or actions. Placing entertainment into the time means something interesting happens during the necessary moments and actions.

An inexperienced performer will accomplish a trick such as the “appearing cane” and then have a moment of uncertainly because he has failed to think ahead about what to do with the cane after it has appeared. I have seen magicians produce a cane, look around for a moment as if it has only then occurred to them that it needs to be put some place, and then throw it off stage because they don’t know what else to do with it.

An experienced performer knows immediately where the cane goes once it appears. He does not waste a second putting it away.
An inexperienced performer will finish with the “appearing cane” and then, after a delay in figuring out where to put it, bend down behind a table to find the props he needs for his next presentation. Once he finds the props, he sets them in place on his table. This process may take anywhere from thirty seconds to a minute. During this time nothing else happens. It is dead time. The audience is waiting.

An experienced performer knows the audience must not be aware of a wait or delay. He has positioned props so he does not have to go looking for them. Even though the time he needs for positioning props is brief, he has prepared to make it interesting. Clever comments and jokes are used to keep the show going. The audience does not see a wait or delay because, even though he is between tricks at the moment, the performer is still performing by way of what he is saying.

The secret to making good transitions is simple: be aware of where they are and how long they will take. Once transition points are identified, work out how to handle them. Usually you will need to handle them with appealing words, so have them written into your script. If a transition cannot be handled with words, find some way to make it happen fast and be part of the fun of the show. Use your performing skills to transform mundane tasks of clearing a stage or moving equipment into appreciated and even wonderful moments.
MAGICISM #15. No Cost Means No Value

Should a magician do shows for free? What about participating in a benefit event where there is no compensation for the performer?

It is a practical reality that when people don’t have to pay for something they usually have a hard time understanding its value. Beyond that, when they are not required to invest in something they typically see that there is little to protect.

I first became aware of this when doing programs for churches. A church would contact me about a program and then say, “We have no money.” Since it seemed like a good cause, I would go ahead and do the program anyway. In circumstances like this, because of my generosity, I expected to be treated with appreciation. I experienced the opposite. Since it did not cost anything to bring me in, churches made little effort to help me do my best. They often would not properly publicize the show. It was not unusual to find no one there at the arranged time to open the church for unloading and setup. The platform would not be ready for the performance. The situation was not taken seriously because the church groups felt they had little to lose. (In the financial sense this was true).

In contrast, once I became better known, other churches would bring me in and pay high fees. At first I was mystified to discover that these groups who paid so much turned out to be the same groups who also did the most for me. The shows were superbly publicized, all requests about staging needs were heeded, and I would
even find a big fruit basket in my motel room! It seemed that since they had spent good money to book me, they wanted to make sure I was a “hit” with the audience. They were protecting their investment. They did everything possible to insure my success.

I found the same thing to be true when performing for community events. If I would do a program for free, I was usually frustrated with stage conditions and how they treated the time of my performance. When I was paid good money, the show situation was much better.

What did I conclude? I believe in doing benefit programs and in donating time and skills. However, I no longer give away a full program. I see a difference between an “appearance” and a show. For the right cause, without compensation, I will do something brief. This works well. I have found that if I offer the entire show for free, it is likely to be viewed as “not worth much or he would not be giving it away.” If I make a short appearance the view is the opposite, “We are fortunate that he would break away from other valuable work in order to share with us.” You might say I give away “show samples”, but not the show itself. If people are going to see my “real show”, they must invest in it.

We can learn from how some entertainment superstars handle the matter. With no compensation they may show up at a worthy event and say a few words or do something short, but they don’t give away the whole package.

I love to give. I have learned it must be done within limits or value is lost.
MAGICISM #16. Walk On

It was my first time to perform at a major magic convention. I stood center stage behind the curtain, waiting for it to open. I heard the emcee say my name. The curtain opened, but the music did not start. Something was wrong with the sound system. The lighting was also wrong. So there I stood wondering, “How long do I hold this pose? How long do I wait like this?” In rehearsal and in my visualization of how the show would go it seemed really clever to be standing there center stage in a power stance when the curtains parted. Now I felt stupid. I felt even more stupid as the delay grew. I did not know if I should continue to hold the pose or just walk off stage. The audience understood my dilemma and found it somewhat humorous. Finally it was necessary to close the curtains on me while the technical people figured out their problems.

Eventually the technical people gave the signal that everything was in working order so we started over. I took my position again and this time when the curtains opened, the audience laughed. I can’t blame them. After seeing me hold the pose so long while nothing happened it must have looked funny to see me standing there again.

The rest of the act went well and I think I got some extra applause from the standpoint of sympathy. Even so, I did not feel good about the performance. It was hard to overcome the fact that it all began with me having the sense of “standing there like a fool”.

After the show I met Dale Salwak in the hallway. Dale is one of my heroes in magic. I love his style, have great respect for his character, and his knowledge of
magic and showmanship speaks for itself.

Dale kindly asked, “How did you feel about your performance?” I said, “Frankly, the way it started made me miserable.” He smiled and said; “Now you know why I always walk onto the stage.”

That is all he had to say. I instantly understood the logic behind the statement. Dale waits in the wings. Then he makes an entrance. This way, if a sound cue is wrong or there is a problem with the lighting, he can stay out of view. He does not walk on until the technical people have things right.

That convention experience was the last time I ever stood center stage waiting for the curtains to open. I learned how to make a nice “walk on” entrance. After the curtains open and I know the music is right, I appear. This decision has spared me from awkward moments time and time again.

It is not uncommon for the sound man to play the music of another performer rather than your own. It is not uncommon for the sound man to fail to bring your music up when the act begins so the opening seconds of the first song are missed and your timing is off. Tables can be in the wrong place. Debris from a previous act can still be on stage and in your way. There are a wide variety of potential difficulties.

I think remaining off stage and then walking on when things are right is better than taking the risk of having to stand in view as the primary object of attention when there are problems and the situation is out of your control.
MAGICISM #17. People Don’t Care Much About Who You Are Until They See What You Can Do

One of my pet peeves is hearing a show start with the words, “How are you all doing?” I realize some performers can get away with doing this, but I have never understood it. Should not a professional entertainer be able to come up with a better opening line? Does he really want to know how the audience is doing? I doubt it. He has posed a question that in the circumstance is meaningless.

I think one reason why some begin with such non-professional words is a lack of confidence. The performer is unsure of himself and therefore wants to find out that the audience is happy and agreeable. It might be said that he hopes to be their friend before he takes the risk of doing anything for them. He is trying to be personal.

There is nothing wrong with being friendly and personal, but trying to accomplish this as the first thing in the show is a mistake. People do not buy tickets in order to meet a nice person. They buy tickets because they want a worthwhile entertainment experience. If a performer really does care “How are you all doing?” he will understand that the audience is not there to hear him say, “Hello.” They do not want the mundane. They want fun and excitement.

A performer should see it as his or her responsibility to win the audience over before becoming personal. Whether or not he feels the confidence, he must approach the audience in a confident manner and
immediately entertain. He should say something that is appealing or do something that is fascinating. After showing what he can do, or saying things that will be a pleasure to hear, then he can slow down and say, “Hello.”

My opinion on this matter may not be enough, so consider the approach of those who put more money into entertainment and who know more about entertainment than anyone else in the world. Hollywood and Las Vegas. How do Hollywood movies begin? With casual information and relaxed storylines? (Opening credits don’t count. They are “pre-show”). How do the top Vegas shows begin? With a friendly person saying, “Did you have a good day?” No. The movies begin with something designed to instantly grab attention and keep it. Plot and character development come after the explosion, car chase, slapstick accident, or whatever else is used to impress the audience. Vegas shows begin with song and dance. Production numbers along with lighting effects and great music are used to “wow” the crowd. Then introductions are made.

Yes, there are exceptions to the rule, but the rule still exists. Entertain first. Build relationship second. This works because it is basic human nature to want to know more about interesting and exciting things. Once people believe you have interesting and exciting abilities, they actually care about who you are. If you have “star” quality, they want to know you. Until you show them something special, they may see it as a bother to have to listen to you.
MAGICISM #18. Separate The Reveal From The Steal

Fundamental to being a magician is being able to secretly take things out of view or bring things into view of the audience. Magicians use the term “stealing” to refer to the hidden movements that make this possible. When the audience believes the magician has a coin in his hand, but actually he has taken it away; we say he has “stolen it”. If the audience does not believe a magician has a coin in his hand, but he has secretly picked one up and placed it into his hand, it is again called “stealing” the coin. This time he has stolen the coin for the purpose of making a production rather than showing a vanish.

A factor sometimes overlooked in considering the production that becomes possible because of an effective “steal” is time. Performers forget or simply do not understand in the first place how much time has to do with keeping their secrets. Inexperienced and/or unlearned performers behave as if, since the steal was done properly, the audience should be shown right away that something has mysteriously appeared. It seems their thoughts are; “Now I’ve got it, so I must show it to you!”

The problem with this is when very little time separates the act of stealing from the revelation of the stolen object; audiences can more easily mentally reconstruct previous actions and guess when the sneaky deed must have been done. Compare it to a genuine theft. If a shoplifter takes an item and seconds later a clerk sees the item missing, the likelihood is greater that
the thief will be caught. The clerk will remember who was recently near the item and look around to find that person. The culprit will be recognized.

If instead no one realizes the object is missing until hours later, the thief will be long gone and it is doubtful that anyone will have a clue as to who he was. Time is a friend to the thief.

It should go without saying that magicians are not thieves. Our deception is purely for entertainment purposes. Yet the same concept applies. The more time there is between the move that makes the effect and the actual revelation of the effect, the harder it will be for people to figure out the method involved.

If you secretly pull a dove from your coat under cover of silks, don’t immediately show it. Let seconds go by. Change body language. Maybe even do another trick with your free hand. Then show there is a dove in the silks!

If you “steal” a silk fountain from behind a table, follow the same course of action. Don’t show it right away. Find a way to lead people into forgetting about the table before you unleash the fountain. By the time they see this bubbling burst of beauty in your hand the fact that you were recently near a table should have become insignificant. Ideally it will be gone from conscious memory.

Steals are often hard to do. When we do them well we are excited and want to quickly show off the result. If we resist this urge and patiently wait for a better time to display our accomplishment, the magic will be stronger.
MAGICISM #19. If It Looks Like You Don’t Know What You Are Doing, People Assume You Don’t Know What You Are Talking About

This is for those who use magic in public speaking and especially for those who do gospel magic. It must be understood that there is a critical connection between competence and credibility. An incompetent messenger can seriously damage a message.

My experience with gospel magicians goes back more than thirty years. On numerous occasions I have heard sincere individuals say, “It does not matter if my tricks work as long as people hear the lesson.” They do not seem to understand that if the tricks do not work, people may be distracted by the failures to the point that, even though they physically hear the message, their minds do not recognize or receive it. Rather than thinking about “wonderful love” the audience will be thinking, “Does he really think anyone is fooled by that pitiful attempt at sleight of hand?” If a thumb tip drops on the floor or a load drops out of a box at the wrong time, people are not going to be listening to the words of the speaker, they are going to be thinking to themselves, “So that’s how it is done!”

This matter goes beyond the working of a few tricks to apply to the overall image of the presenter. Inappropriate dress suggests that a performer is out of touch with the occasion and someone who makes uninformed decisions. Improper, limited, or crude vocabulary suggests the performer is not well educated. The conclusion will be, “Why should we take him
seriously, he obviously does not know as much as we do!” Weak showmanship and mediocre stagecraft suggest a weak and mediocre grasp on life in general. Audiences want to listen to successful people who can show them how to find success. If it appears that the speaker himself cannot achieve success, how can he teach them to have it? As the saying goes, “Don’t buy hair restorer from a bald man.” Before people buy in to what someone has to say they need to have confidence in the person who is talking!

Some magicians have entered the public speaking field believing that magic tricks will give them an edge. This can be true. However, it is only true when the tricks are part of a presentation, which is characterized by skill and intelligence.

It is a “fact of the podium” that must be embraced. To succeed as a speaker or teacher you need to possess an appearance of success. In practical terms this means if magic is used as a visual aid, the tricks must be good. It is better to not use a trick at all than it is to have it come across as stupid or a flop. (Everyone makes mistakes. Audiences understand this and can be gracious, but they will not be gracious about or have patience with incompetence). If you are speaking with magic, do not think that the idea that you “do some magic” will be enough for the audience. Use only tricks that you can do well. Give extra attention to having a professional way about you. Learn how to speak properly. Make sure you know what you are talking about.
MAGICISM #20. If It Looks Like You Do Know What You Are Doing, People Assume You Do Know What You Are Talking About

This is a corollary to magicism #19. It is also the positive side of the matter. It is sometimes astonishing to see what people will listen to and believe because they have already concluded that the speaker is superbly competent.

A number of years ago the basketball star Michael Jordan was in the news for landing an advertising contract that paid him several million dollars. It was his job to promote a particular brand of underwear. In light of pure logic does that make any sense? What does a basketball player know about underwear that the common man would not know? Why would a basketball player’s insight about underwear even matter to the common man?

Logic isn’t the issue. It seems unkind to say, but nevertheless it is true that the gullibility of the public is the issue. There is an aspect of human nature that suggests most people do not see a need to have “two plus two make four” when it comes to personal matters. In life, things do not have to add up properly to impress. World champion basketball player plus underwear seems to them to be a good deal!

What does impress people is celebrity status and great achievements. Since Michael Jordan is viewed as one of the greatest basketball players ever (many would say the greatest), people are willing to assume that whatever he endorses must be good. It is pretty much a
constant state of affairs in our society that those who are “stars” are used to sell everything from automobiles to salad dressing. The fact that the real area of their expertise has nothing to do with what they sell does not matter to the average person.

How does this apply to those who have chosen to use magic tricks in context of public speaking? It means it is imperative for us to be really good magicians! Why? Because showing people that we are really good at what we do normally leads them to believing our message must be good as well. Being a great magician does not really make one an expert on customer service (or whatever your message is), but possessing expertise in one area is often viewed as being someone who has expertise about other things too.

This concept must not be abused. As a matter of integrity, we should not manipulate the trust of those who employ our talents. (After earning trust we must tell truth). At the same time, it is wisdom to realize that if we can solidly impress people with our talent it is more likely they will hear what we have to say.

When we come across as skilled performers, when our costuming conveys the message that we are true professionals, when we astonish people with our unique abilities; the odds are greater that they will also be impressed with our message.

Bottom line: Being viewed as some kind of “star” can increase the ability to communicate.
MAGICISM #21. Make Everything Appealing, When Possible, Also Make It Interesting

One of the criteria in the *Society Of American Magicians* stage contest competition is “Presentation”. Presentation is not about the magic the magician does; it is about the manner in which it is displayed to the audience. Whether or not tricks work is evaluated under other criteria. This is about the magician himself and the context he creates for his performance.

I remember seeing a young competitor come storming out of a judging session upset about the scores he received. Among other things, he complained that one of the judges had docked him some points because his shoes were scuffed. In an exasperated manner the young man said, “What does that have to do with magic?”

He had a lot to learn. If he was not at a place where he understood that the look of an act does impact the kind of magical experience a performer can deliver he should not have been in the contest in the first place. The judge was right. Whether or not shoes are properly cared for can affect the ability to succeed as an entertainer.

Presentation is a term that applies to the work of a chef and is a particular concern in high-class restaurants. It is clearly understood that it is not enough to serve someone a great steak. It needs to be presented well. This means taste is not the only concern. How it looks on the plate and the color of surrounding garnishes is important. How the steak is positioned when served is
treated as an artistic accomplishment. Why? Because experience has taught these food experts that the appearance of the meal has much to do with convincing the consumer about its quality. The person ordered a steak, but may not properly appreciate it when what surrounds it is wrong.

The same concept applies to the magician. A high-class entertainer realizes that how the magic is “served” is crucial. A great steak served on a dirty plate is going to be sent back to the kitchen. A great trick performed by a poorly dressed magician on a junky stage with shabby equipment may be disregarded.

The core of the matter is that everything under the performers’ control should look good. It begins with costuming then applies to tables, the condition of props, how the assistant is dressed, the backdrop, and anything else that the performer can do something about.

Ideally, the goal should be more than just looking good or “professional”. It should be the intent to make everything interesting. I don’t just want my costume to be clean and well fitting, I want it to make people think “Wow, that is neat!” When the curtain opens on my stage, before I am ever in view, I want the audience to be thinking, “This looks great!”

To state this concern in a practical manner: Analyze everything about your act or show that the audience will see. If they will see it at all, it needs to look right. If you can go beyond making it look good to making it impressive, that is even better.
MAGICISM #22. Punching, Punching, Punching!

I was discussing magic with the marvelous Japanese magician, Fukai. Our topic was what it takes to have a truly successful act. Obviously, English is not Fukai’s first language. By way of making many trips to the USA, and through watching American television programs, he has learned to speak it surprisingly well. However, since he is self-taught, he has developed some novel expressions.

To express his opinion about a concept, which he believes to be crucial to doing magic well, he used imagery from the sport of boxing. He said that a magician must be “punching, punching, punching.”

By this he meant that a show should have many prepared impact points. These are moments when the magician transfers the energy of a routine into a climax that is accentuated by a specific pose. It is like the magician is delivering a punch. He “hits” the audience with a magical scene and the result is a “Wow!” The audience is powerfully impressed.

According to Fukai, these impact points should build on one another. About the time the audience thinks, This is such an amazing and wonderful thing that it makes the entire performance worthwhile,” another thing should happen that is equally or more amazing and wonderful.

He admits that it is not easy to do this, but says that ideally, as the end of an act or show is reached, there should be a series of “hits” where each “punch” is stronger than the one that preceded it.
In other words...hit the audience with a trick that is so impressive they conclude it must be the high point of the performance. Follow it with another trick that is even more impressive. Then, when they are thinking you could not possibly do anything more impressive than what they have already seen, hit them with a finale that could be called the “knock-out blow”. With it you win the contest. The natural result should be an enthusiastic ovation.

There is much value in this point of view. It is good to punctuate a performance with “punches”. Here are a few of my thoughts about how to apply the idea to your own act or show.

1. Don’t think of the end of your act or show as the only place where there is a climax. Plan to have climatic happenings several times along the way in the act or show, then the best one at the end.

2. Remember the value of a good pose in signaling a climax. Part of what makes the punch is the stance you take during the pause that follows the exciting thing that just happened.

3. Relentlessly pursue the idea of creating a climax upon a climax and then again one more climax. (Such as producing a silk fountain, out of that comes a surprising burst of streamers, then out of the streamer comes a huge flag). Three levels of “wow” at the end of a routine is an extremely difficult thing to create, but if you can do it the result is spectacular.
MAGICISM #23. Don’t Call Them Silks And Sponge Balls

It is easy to overlook small details that make a big difference. A classic example of this is the performer who refers to the handkerchiefs in his hands as silks. Who ever heard of silks? When magicians talk to other magicians they can say silks and be understood because silks are tools of the trade, but layman do not speak of silks (unless they work in the clothing industry). In daily life we do not call bed sheets “satins” and we do not call dinner napkins “cottons” so why refer to a square of cloth as a silk?

It is probably better for magicians, when in front of the public, to speak of silks as handkerchiefs or scarves. It makes more sense to the common ear and reduces suspicion. Using the word silk suggests that something strange is involved. Since it is not a word a normal person would use the idea is conveyed that the magician has something a normal person would not have. Therefore it may possess a strange or weird quality that makes a special trick possible. On the other hand, if it is just a nice scarf or handkerchief there is no reason to assume it has been tampered with or that it possesses an unusual quality.

As with silks, so it is with sponge balls. They are tools of the trade. When magicians speak to other magicians it is fine to call sponge balls what they are. However, when performing for the public, if a magician says, “I have here three sponge balls, please put one in your hand,” is it possible that he has just suggested the secret to his trick? By identifying the substance from
which the balls are made he has indicated the fact that the balls can be squeezed together and put into small places.

I think that, as much as possible, sponge balls should be treated only as balls. Do not inform the audience, “Here is a trick with sponge balls.” Instead say, “Here is a strange happening involving a ball.” Most balls do not compress. Most balls do not change size under pressure. Therefore the audience is not likely to assume the balls being used will have such qualities.

When thought is put into the matter, it would make sense for a magician to want his audience to believe that the balls do not compress at all. This would make the things that happen with them even more astonishing.

Make it a habit to call your sponge balls only balls. This will help you keep in mind what the perspective of the audience is supposed to be.

Note: Take care in your script about when and how you say the word balls. When you can, say ball instead of balls. Be smart about it or there will be those in your audience who twist the word into something crude.
MAGICISM #24. Have An Act!

In February of 2006, at the Columbus Magi-Fest, I emceed a show on which John Carney performed. John Carney is the only performer to have won the Magic Castle’s magician of the year award in every possible category. His tremendous technical skills, combined with his knowledge of the art of magic and his understanding of showmanship, have made him someone who merits the title of “The Magician’s Magician”.

Backstage I heard John talking to one of the other performers about making changes in a show. He commented that he rarely is able to come up with more than ten minutes of good new material in a year. He went on to say that for him to come up with an entirely new thirty minute show in one year is pretty much an impossible task.

Why did he say that? Could he not just go to his local magic store and purchase ten new tricks that could be quickly and easily learned? If each new trick would span about three minutes in performance time, he would have his thirty minutes of new stuff almost right away! In this day of new DVD’s flooding the magic market on what seems to be a weekly basis and new tricks being advertised every month that claim to be the magician’s dream come true, should it not be a simple matter to collect a lot of new material?

John is a professional performer. As a professional he understands the difference between mastering the mechanics of a trick and crafting a polished presentation. It is true that sometimes one can learn how to do a trick in just minutes. If one spends a few hours in practice every day for a few weeks, he or
she can manage almost any magical maneuver. But one cannot polish and perfect a presentation in a short time.

Seasoned performers like John Carney understand that there is a huge difference between acquiring tricks and creating worthwhile presentations of those tricks. They also know that success in magic comes not from possessing apparatus and gimmicks, but from having a fine tuned act.

In show business terms an act is a performance piece that has its own beginning, middle, and end. It is more than a trick. It is more than a routine. It is more than a display of ability. It is an establishment of personality and credibility by way of entertainment skills that produces a pleasing experience for the audience. This happens in a comparatively short period of time. In essence, an act is a very brief show; you might call it a mini-show, which can stand alone on its own merit.

An act requires much work to develop. In one afternoon a person can go to a magic store and purchase ten new tricks. But that person cannot, in just one afternoon, figure out how to use those tricks to create a magical relationship with an audience that starts in a captivating manner, maintains interest all along the way, and leads to a beautiful conclusion.

Learn to think beyond the idea of doing tricks. Work on having an act!
MAGICISM #25. Seriously, Have An Act!

The thing that entirely changed my direction in the magic business and made it possible for me to move from amateur to professional status was an admonition from Marvyn Roy (also known as Mr. Electric). He is my primary coach and mentor. Years ago, when we first met he said, “Duane, you don’t have an act.”

That comment shocked me. I was confused by his challenge because at that time I already had a show. Now I realize that what I was doing did not merit the label of show. It really was only an exhibition of tricks.

It must have been a somewhat interesting exhibition, because people did come to see it, but it was falling far short of its entertainment potential. This was the case because I did not yet know who I was as a magician. I did not have a consistent style. I did not have a performing identity. I knew how to do tricks, but I did not know how to create a magical relationship with an audience.

Marvyn insisted that I develop a short performance piece, consisting of a beginning, middle, and end that would emphasize my personality while displaying skill and offering entertainment.

When I decided to follow his advice on this matter, my life in magic was transformed. It forced me to learn who I was as an entertainer and how to connect with those who watch what I do. It forced me to put showmanship above the mechanics of doing tricks. As well, it made me commercial. The act that Mary and I developed has put us into high profile venues in many countries, on five continents, and in forty-seven of the USA states.
I learned it from Marvyn and since have seen it proven true again and again. There are some who have found success in magic without doing this, but my observation is that most successful magicians have had their career grow out of a well-crafted act. (Johnny Thompson, Lance Burton, Juliana Chen, Mac King, Greg Frewin, Dave Hamner, and Kevin James are just a few of the many examples we could name).

Here are a few thoughts about creating a short (ten minutes or less) act.
1. Don’t try to put together one solid eight or ten minute piece of magic. Instead, develop short segments of magic, from one to four minutes in length, and then link them together to make a complete act.
2. Plan a definite beginning, middle, and ending for the act.
3. Keep showmanship foremost in mind. The act should convey personality, demonstrate credibility, and be fun for people to watch. The act really is not about the tricks, it is about you and the audience.
4. It is possible to build an act around one routine or one illusion, but there still must be a beginning, middle, and end to the presentation. There should be changes in energy. An act built around only one routine or illusion especially needs an unspoken story line, which the audience can easily follow.
5. Don’t worry about building your act around “hard stuff to do”. Build it around solid and proven effects.
MAGICISM #26. Have Passion To Find Out Why Things Don’t Work

We visited a town where a magician had his own theater and show. The reviews of the show were awful. When we spoke to “locals” about the show we were directly told, “Save your money. It isn’t worth it.” A friend was with me who has enjoyed much success in magic both by way of performing in high-level venues and by way of financial reward. After hearing what people were saying about the show he told me he wanted to go. In fact, the more bad things we heard about the show the more firmly he stated that he wanted to see it.

Someone with us asked, “Why do you want to go when you know it is bad?” My experienced friend replied, “Because there is so much to learn.” He went on to say that he wanted to find out for himself why people disliked the show. He wanted to see why the magician was getting such negative press. He wanted to know why the show was failing.

In my opinion, this is one of the keys to my friend’s magical success. He has embraced the need to know “Why?” While other magicians are preoccupied with methods and mechanics he is trying to understand what makes performances weak or strong.

When we start in magic, most of us are preoccupied with the “how”. We want to know how tricks are done, how to do moves, and how to learn the secrets to the illusions we have not yet figured out. There is nothing wrong with this. It is a normal and necessary part of the education of a magician. If we do not know how things work, we will not be able to do them. But the
time does come when we must start asking “why”. If we
don’t learn to do this, we will never rise above mediocrity.

Johnny Ace Palmer’s FISM winning close up act is
an example. In his lecture he talks about a place in his
act where a bottle is produced. It is a great trick. Yet
there was a time when it was not getting a great reaction.
Johnny asked himself, “Why?” It was not a matter of
“How can I do the trick better?” It was a matter of “Why
don’t people respond better? It is a terrific effect. Why
doesn’t it have more impact?”

Eventually he figured out that the problem was
timing. His method for doing the trick was fine. What
needed to be fixed was his manner of displaying the
bottle and emphasizing the fact that it was solid and
“real”. This led him to adjust his presentation of the bottle
and find the “wow” factor he was looking for.

This is what great performers do. They ask “why”
questions and then find answers. Whether an audience
is thrilled with a trick or unimpressed, they want to know
why. They realize that determining why things work or do
not work, why things are appreciated or unappreciated,
gives them knowledge to duplicate successes while
avoiding the repetition of failure.

Learning to always wonder “why” teaches us to
see much more than tricks. It is the means by which we
find the true art and heart of magic.
MAGICISM #27. The Key Costuming Concerns Are Interest, Appeal, And Credibility

Rule number one about costuming for magicians is that there are no rules. There are guidelines. There are practical concepts that have been proven true by the experience of many, but there are no unbreakable rules.

Rule number two is that most of us must behave as if there really are rules. The average magician must not make the mistake of thinking that the approach of the unusual character or exceptional personality will work for him or her too.

A comic genius may be able to walk out on stage in blue jeans and a t-shirt and win over the audience. One who is not a comic genius cannot do this. A superbly talented close up artist with uncombed hair and stains from a recent meal still on his shirt may have people eagerly gather around to watch his work. Those who are not the savants of magic will fail miserably if they take the same approach. Most performers need to “dress for success“.

Generally speaking, there are three matters to consider carefully when deciding what to wear on stage. The first is to dress in a manner that makes you interesting. When the country western music star Barbara Mandrell was asked about the spectacular gowns, dazzling jewelry, and big hairstyles she often wore she said, “I owe it to my audience to not look like I just walked up out of the audience to sing for them.” She understood that the commonplace is not particularly interesting and therefore felt an obligation to create an
appearance that was out of the ordinary.

Some have said that the basic guideline for a performer is to be the best-dressed person in the room. This is not bad advice, but it misses the point. More important than being best dressed is being dressed in a manner that draws attention and sends out the message that you are someone worth watching. Your goal is not to make a fashion statement. It is to be a person that others want to see.

Audiences do not pay money to see the same thing they can see for free. They want to see something special and different.

This is an important reason for putting thought and effort into costuming. It makes you a point of interest. When others are wearing street clothes, the performer wears a fancy shirt. When others have dressed up a bit, the performer is wearing a great suit with an eye catching necktie and matching pocket scarf. On the big stage the magician is the one in the jacket with the unusual cut, brilliant color, and exciting design.

It is a simple yet valid observation about show business. Those who dress in a manner that says, “I’m worth looking at” give themselves an edge in their relationship with an audience.

The second matter to consider is the need to dress in a manner that is appealing. Elvis Presley was a master showman. It is hard to think of any other name in entertainment history that captivated audiences like he did. Once, when asked about his jumpsuits and rhinestones, he said, “If people want to hear me sing they won’t buy a ticket, they will buy my records. When they buy a ticket they want to see a show.” Elvis was much more than a singer. He was an attraction.
Does it not make sense for a magician to also want to be an attraction? What good is it to do magic for empty seats? For many magicians the real trick is not performing illusions, it is convincing people to come and watch them do it.

A showman can sell tickets and pack out a theater. A technician can do many things perfectly and yet be unknown. There are magicians who fit the technician category. They have terrific abilities, but are starving because have not learned how to appeal to an audience. They do not know how to turn their work into an event that others want to experience. Good costuming can help a performer become more of an attraction. Sparkles, inspiring designs, and even an occasional outrageously decorated suit or dress can become a point of conversation and publicity.

At a minimum, the magician should dress in a manner that people are pleased to see. Ideally, he should look like a star. That is something people are willing to pay to see.

The third matter to consider is the need to dress in a manner that conveys credibility. This is the most important factor to consider. What is worn must not contradict what the artist is about. I heard Lisa Menna lecture about performing in corporate settings. She said, “This is not the place for scantily clad assistants!” She explained that such groups put a high premium on competence and tend to dismiss those who try to use style (or sex) to compensate for a lack of substance. That which appears to be a cheap, easy, or sleazy way to get attention turns them off. They are turned on by professionalism and effectiveness.

Is an attractive woman in a skimpy garment
interesting and appealing? Often the answer is yes. Yet credibility is more important. Therefore when such costuming is not suitable for the occasion, or consistent with the image the performer is trying to establish, it hurts the performance rather than helping it.

Interest and appeal must be achieved by appropriate means. Costuming must be suitable for the character of the performer and the nature of the venue.

Usually, it does not make sense to wear a tuxedo to a birthday party show. It does not make sense to wear a brightly colored vest decorated with balloons to a black tie affair. There is a time when a rhinestone-studded jacket is just the right thing to wear. There is another time when a business suit is a better decision. It is rare for one costume to work for all occasions.

Bottom line: They say “You can’t judge a book by its cover”, yet many people do decide to purchase a book because of what they see on the cover. Costuming is like packaging. When it is good it can help people buy in to what the magician has to offer. When it is bad it may cause people to turn away.
MAGICISM #28. When People Say They Don’t Like Magic, Magic Usually Is Not The Problem

I remember how surprised I was the first time I heard someone say, “I hate magic.” I had just recently been bitten by the magic bug and was head over heels excited about it. It confounded me to think that someone would not only dislike magic, but even claim to detest it.

After being a working performer for many years the remark no longer surprises me. I have heard it too many times. Moreover I think I understand it. The person probably does not hate magic. What the person hates is the manner in which he or she has seen magic done. It is a shame that bad performers who claim to be magicians can so adeptly give the impression that magic itself is bad.

It may be fair to say that many who do magic and call themselves magicians actually are not. Compare it to the world of carpentry. I know someone who has a nice collection of carpentry tools. On occasion he uses them to saw boards, pound in nails, and build things out of wood. Is he a carpenter? No. He is my grandson. One Christmas he wanted “Tools like daddy has.” Grandpa found out about the desire and so the tools appeared under the Christmas tree. Someday the boy may be a great carpenter. Right now he is just playing with the tools.

Some who call themselves magicians are really only those who are playing with the tools. They have acquired the equipment that real magicians use and most likely have even printed out business cards announcing
that they are expert prestidigitators, but they are just doers of tricks. When they do their tricks audiences are unimpressed because they realize it is “just a trick” and they may also be thinking, “It is just something he bought at a magic store.” Making matters even worse is the fact that since the so-called magician really does not understand magic he may present his tricks in an obnoxious manner.

It must be understood that magic is a craft and an artistic endeavor. Just as carpentry is not about tools, it is about building things, so magic is not about tricks, it is about constructing a magical entertainment experience.

To be a great magician one must learn the difference between doing tricks and presenting magic. The question is not “How does the trick work?”. The question is, “What must I do to insure that the audience appreciates and enjoys the trick?”

A real magician has found answers for that question. When he performs people have a good time watching. Of course there are always people who are exceptions to the rule. Every discipline seems to have those who dislike it. However the general truth is, when magic is done as it is supposed to be done, it is naturally interesting and entertaining. Magic would have many more fans if better performers demonstrated it more often.
MAGICISM #29. Methods Do Not Make The Magic, Magicians Make The Magic

The typical magician is personally entertained by the methods to magic tricks. Occasionally magicians may even joke that the methods behind some effects are more interesting than the effects themselves.

But this is not true for an audience. Since the methods are “secret”, audience members should not be considering them. For the audience, the effect and its presentation is the key to entertainment.

I cannot prove it is true, but I have heard the following story about Percy Abbott during his early days with Abbott’s Magic Company. (Those who knew Percy tell me they have no problem believing the story is true). A customer sent a letter complaining about a product. In the letter the customer claimed that an item Percy had sold him was “A piece of junk.” Percy’s response was the following: “The item that you claim is a piece of junk, in the hands of a good magician, is a masterpiece!”

His point was that information and apparatus are not the things that make magic good. Good magic comes from good magicians. I have made a two-part formula out of his remark:

1. GREAT PROPS PLUS POOR PRESENTATION EQUALS WEAK MAGIC.

2. WEAK PROPS PLUS GREAT PRESENTATION EQUALS STRONG MAGIC.

It should be obvious that the intent of the formula
is not to encourage the use of inferior apparatus and bad trick concepts. It is to emphasize the crucial issue that the presentation of a trick is more important than the trick itself.

An example of this is the production of playing cards at the fingertips. Many persons with an interest in magic have purchased books and DVDs that teach how to accomplish this fairly difficult feat. After studying the books and DVDs, some have learned and mastered the methods to an uncanny degree. Does this mastery mean those who can do the card productions have now become great magical entertainers? The answer usually is no. More often than not these performers will leave their audiences bored and unimpressed by the endless production of playing cards.

The fact that one can produce playing cards at his or her fingertips does not guarantee good magic. The real secret in card manipulations is not being able to do them, it is in being able to make audiences care about watching you do them.

Tricks don’t make people care. How a performer walks, stands, speaks, smiles, dresses, pauses, poses, acts, reacts, and other such things are what make people care. The plot, pace, and production value of a presentation are what make people care. Together such things are known as showmanship. Showmanship is the thing that magicians should care about the most. Too often they care about it too little.
MAGICISM #30. The Audience Is Your Best Teacher

This is something else I learned from my friend, Fukai. I was with him in Japan and sat in on a lecture to his students. Someone said to him, “I’m not satisfied with the quality of my act and cannot seem to make it better. What should I do?”

Fukai replied with a question, “How much do you practice?”

The magician said, “Every day for at least three hours.”

Before I share what Fukai advised, I must comment that this statement was received by the group as a perfectly normal declaration. The Japanese do not seem to mind putting time and effort into learning tricks and mastering skills. No one was surprised that a magician would practice this much.

It is an attitude that seems to be in contrast to the mentality we often find among American magicians. Typically we tend to look for self-working, no skill required tricks, that can be purchased today and performed tomorrow.

Back to Fukai and his student. Once the man said he was practicing for hours every day, Fukai asked, “How often do you perform your act for the public?”

The man said, “I have only done it in front of an audience on three occasions.”

Fukai said, “This is your problem. The audience is your best teacher and you are not allowing yourself to learn from them.”

Fukai went on to explain, “A time comes when you
must start doing routines for the public. If you wait to get something perfect before you try it out in front of people, it never will be perfect. Only by doing magic in live situations can you really learn what works best. How the audience responds to things helps you see what you have mastered and what you have not. It helps you see what works and what does not. You must get out and do shows to get better!”

This was the first time I had ever heard anyone say that the audience is a teacher, but I immediately agreed. To become a good performer it is necessary to have real performing experience. The common saying is that, “Practice makes perfect.” The truth is “Practice makes permanent.” Correct practice leads to correct performance. Wrong practice leads to wrong performance.

By stepping out in front of an audience and trying something out (that you have been practicing a reasonable amount of time) there is the opportunity to discover whether or not your practice is going in the right direction.

Fukai was not saying, “Don’t practice, just go out there and perform.” He was saying, “Don’t make the mistake of thinking that practice in front of a mirror with no human feedback can led you to perfection.”

Bottom line: You cannot perfect a trick without time in front of an audience.
MAGICISM #31. Get To The Funny Fast

I was asked to teach showmanship to a group of clowns. As part of research and preparation for the lecture I watched a clown skit competition. A glaring flaw in many of the skits was the fact that nothing funny happened until the end of the skit. Until then, the clowns were counting on their costumes and makeup to carry the entertainment. They walked on stage, entered into the motions or began the words that set things up for the climax (what they call the “blow off”) and expected everyone just to watch the development of the skit. They did not go for laughs until the end of the routine. Since many of the clowns were beginners in their art, the laughter that came at the end of the skits was often only a matter of people being polite and trying to encourage them. They really weren’t very funny.

My observation was that even though the climax of the skit was to be the big laugh point it would have been better if the clowns had been more determined to start the skit with a laugh as well. The look of a clown is fun, but the job of the clown is to be funny. The fact that a clown is funny should be established as quickly as possible. Making people wait to see if the clown is eventually going to be funny may lead them to thinking, “This clown is not very good.”

The same thing that applies to clowns applies to all entertainers. Audiences make quick judgments about someone who walks on stage. Within the first few seconds of seeing a performer they are already deciding whether or not they will like him. If a performer immediately impresses them they tend to think, “I am going to enjoy this!” If a performer does not immediately
impress them they tend to think, “This is going to be a bore.” A wise performer knows there can be no delay in winning people over. It is a mistake to assume an audience will wait patiently throughout a two or three minute build up before deciding if it is going to be a good act.

This is why it is better for a magician to begin a show with a vanishing cane than with a mind reading routine. The cane instantly vanishes and conveys to the audience the idea of “Wow, great things are happening!” The mind reading routine requires them to follow a developing sequence that may test their patience. They will think, “How long is it going to be before I know if this is any good?” (A good mentalist knows his first effect must happen quickly. If it does not, then he had better win the audience over with jokes or fascinating remarks right away).

When I finally did present the lecture to clowns I suggested that they find a way to get a laugh within the first fifteen seconds they are in view. I urged them to tell a joke, hold up a funny sign, or at least do a pratfall and land on their face or rear end. It was to be their goal to create immediate laughter. Then go on with the skit.

As it goes for the clowns, so also magicians. It is a great goal to determine that within the first fifteen seconds on stage we will have done something fascinating, or said something clever, and hopefully already earned applause.
MAGICISM #32. Surprise For The Eyes, Puzzles For The Mind, Mystery Object Lessons

In spite of the fact that people in these days have easier access to information than any previous generation and in spite of the fact that modern technology supplies our society with marvelous educational opportunities, the public is still often superstitious. People continue to believe things that do not make sense and remain uninformed about things that should be obvious.

I have a friend who was doing table magic in a restaurant in Tennessee. He approached a table and said, “I’m a magician. I would be happy to entertain you while you wait for your meal.” The people at the table frowned and firmly announced, “We don’t believe in you!” This was followed by a stare that made it clear the magician was supposed to go away. He got the message and went on to another table.

“We don’t believe in you” is a ridiculous thing to say. Nevertheless, it is what they said. They are not the only ones who would say such a thing. There are a lot of people in America and other countries that still think magicians are somehow involved in sorcery and dark arts.

One is especially likely to run into this point of view when working in churches. From the very beginning of my career I have been performing in churches. Generally speaking the experience has been good and I have found people to be sensible. However, there have been a few who have possessed what the Scripture calls
“zeal without knowledge.” They draw conclusions before gathering facts and allow such conclusions to push them into silly actions. These are the people who think magicians are doing the devil’s work. They won’t let their children attend the magic show and give the pastor a lot of grief for having a magician come in the first place. It is pretty much impossible to convince these people about the truth. In a classic manner they fit the saying, “Don’t bother me with the facts, I’ve already made up my mind.”

Rather than trying to argue with such people, I think the best course of action is to accept the fact that they are who they are and try to find ways to keep from triggering their misguided passion.

Careful use of words can do much to keep them from believing there is a problem. Normally, when I am booked for a church program, I encourage the pastor to refer to what I do as “illusions” and not magic. Once I am there I make a comment that my specialty is “Surprising your eyes and making puzzles for your mind. It is my job to use tricks and mysteries as entertainment and teaching tools.” It isn’t necessarily logical, but the same people who would be upset if I called myself a magician can be quite comfortable with the idea that I am a specialist in creative teaching techniques.

Bottom line: If you think you will be dealing with people who are nervous about magic, use different terms to refer to what you do. Call yourself an illusionist instead of a magician. In some situations this will remove barriers and open doors.
MAGICISM #33. When Performing For Children Remember Who Signs The Check

To save him from any embarrassment I will leave out details that might point to his identity. Suffice it to say this is about a real person. He had recently left a good job to go full time with magic. A key aspect of his new business plan was doing shows for public schools. Using marketing techniques he had learned in seminars he had several nice bookings as a starting point. In one of the first schools where he performed he did something that became a major set back. It hurt his reputation, made it hard for him to get recommendations, and for a period of time derailed his plan to sell himself to other schools.

During the course of the show, for a reason I do not know, he made an unscripted remark about underwear. As soon as he said the word, the kids laughed. (To children the word underwear is usually viewed as being quite funny). He saw their laughter as a positive thing so he said the word again. They laughed louder. He ended up using the word several more times in the show because the kids found it so humorous.

When the show was over he found himself being confronted by an angry teacher. She said she did not appreciate his crude humor. She even suggested that his emphasis on underwear could be viewed as having inappropriate sexual connotations. He did get his check from that school, but did not get invited back. Worse yet, the word somehow got around to other schools that he was an undesirable performer.
Is the word underwear a bad word? It doesn’t bother me. Was the teacher overreacting? In my opinion, definitely so! Did the children think the magician was great? Yes. None of this changes the fact that he was nearly put out of business because he said what he said. It took him a long time to get back into the schools in his region.

His error was simple. He failed to keep in mind that although performing for kids, there was also an adult audience. The children were not the ones who hired him. Therefore it was his responsibility to make sure that everything he did fit the expectations and criteria of the grownups who were watching. If you are going to do school shows, you must understand the concerns and sensitivities that are strong in your part of the country. Most of all you must understand that you are not working for the kids. You are working for the adults.

The negative in this is we must be careful not to offend the adults who hire us to perform for their kids. The positive is that it is good to impress them. I always try to have at least one and hopefully several tricks in my kid show that are subtly aimed at adults. I want the kids to have a great time, but I also want grownups to be thinking, “This guy is good!” I must find a way to “wow” them. This is important because they pay me and may add a tip to the amount. They are the ones who will brag me up or tear me down. They are the ones who keep me in business.
MAGICISM #34. A Volunteer From The Audience Is A Representative Of The Audience

A long time ago I suggested that there is a thing in the world of magic that could be called “spectator abuse”. It has been a common thing in magic for many years for magicians to believe they are being clever by taking advantage of the good will of volunteers from the audience.

I’ve seen a magician borrow a twenty-dollar bill, mutilate it, vanish it, and then send the spectator back to his seat without reproducing it. The magician proceeds to act as if he forgets about the matter and leaves the spectator to wonder if he would ever see the money again. Finally, about twenty minutes later, the magician reproduces the bill and gives it back to the spectator. In the process he jokes about the anxiety of the spectator and makes fun of the person’s haircut, clothing, and occupation. He does all this with a smug attitude.

To me, such behavior is inappropriate and offensive. It is wrong to make people uncomfortable. It is wrong to treat them in a rude and inconsiderate manner. It is wrong to get laughs from many at the expense of a few or even one. It could be considered as a type of bullying. The fact that it happens on stage in the name of entertainment does not justify it.

It is hard for me to understand how this matter could not be absolutely clear, but some magicians do not see it the way I do. There are those who defend their right to embarrass or make volunteers feel uncomfortable and claim it is an acceptable part of show business.
(There are others who simply are too egotistical to realize how badly they treat those they bring on stage).

To those who disagree I suggest they look beyond the matter of what is socially appropriate or morally acceptable to consider a practical issue: The audience relates much more to the volunteer who is on stage than they do to the magician. Therefore, if the volunteer is not treated right, even though people may laugh about it, they are likely to have sympathy for the volunteer which in time will lead them to dislike the magician. They may think the show is funny, but later they will decide they don’t want to be at it again.

I know women who will not go to magic shows because they were at one in the past and saw a spectator embarrassed on stage. These women think, “What if that had been me? I don’t want to take the risk of being in that situation.” They stay away from the show and talk significant people in their lives into staying home as well. The popularity of magic suffers. The women personally did not have a bad experience at the magic show, but because they empathized with the person whom they believe was treated improperly, the show is a bad memory for them.

Besides the fact that it is the right thing to do, it would be better for magic overall if magicians were committed to making sure that every volunteer has a positive experience. When individual volunteers have a great experience the rest of the audience is more likely to view the entire show as a great experience.
MAGICISM #35. It Is Doubtful That You Are The Exception That Proves The Rule

In response to the previous magicism about spectator abuse someone might say, “What about Don Rickles? He has made a career out of insults and put-downs. The fact that they may experience verbal abuse does not keep people from attending his shows.”

My answer parallels something that took place in a political debate years ago. Vice Presidential hopeful Dan Quayle was asked about something and in reply mentioned a similarity between himself and former President John F. Kennedy. His opponent then fired a vocal broadside at him, “I knew John F. Kennedy, I worked with John F. Kennedy, and young man you are no John F. Kennedy.” The words were devastating. Quayle had made the huge mistake of comparing himself to someone with whom he really did not compare.

To those who name Don Rickles as proof that it is alright to mistreat spectators in the name of entertainment I say the same. “You are no Don Rickles.” When one stops to think about it, Don Rickles is truly exceptional. What other comedian can you name that has reached the heights he has by the same method? There are plenty of guys in low-level comedy clubs trying to get somewhere by his approach, but they aren’t getting anywhere. Eventually they burn out and pass from the scene.

I freely admit that there are a few performers who do well by breaking the rules others must keep. It is indubitable that certain obnoxious people (maybe not
obnoxious in person, but at least obnoxious on stage) have become stars in the entertainment business. For reasons that few if any can identify or define they are able to do almost everything wrong and have it turn out great. What do we say about these people? “They are who they are.” What else is there to say?

The problem these people create is aspiring entertainers who watch them may not have enough sense to realize that it is not possible for another person to do what that person is doing. There is one Don Rickles and then there are thousands of others who do not have a chance for success by behaving like he does. You may know a magician who belittles those who help him on stage and the audience loves him for it. Face it. It is highly unlikely that you can do the same. (If you think you are such a magician, think again. You probably are not).

It should be understood without saying that we are not to take things from the acts of others and put them into our own acts. Secondary to this is the fact that what works for another may not work for us. The fact that the audience roared in laughter when the magician on stage gave his spectator helper a “snuggy” (pulling up the underwear from behind) does not mean you won’t be thrown in jail for trying to do the same.

I assume it is evident I am passionate about this matter. I believe audience members should be treated with respect. Beyond my personal feelings I’m trying to say that for almost everyone, it just won’t work to do otherwise!
MAGICISM #36. Don’t Get So Crafty That You Stop Growing And Making Discoveries

The term crafty is deliberately misused in this magicism. Normally it refers to being sneaky or a schemer. I’m thinking of the word as descriptive of someone who is committed to crafting his or her work. He is one who crafts, so I call him crafty. This is about a person who becomes too crafty. It is possible to become so committed to doing well-crafted material that courage is lost about trying new things.

I have heard seasoned performers say that it may be necessary to perform a routine one hundred times in front of an audience before it is all that it needs to be. Every time the routine is performed a minor adjustment is made. Something is learned or changed. Finally all possible adjustments and corrections are done and the routine is perfectly crafted. It is just right. The performer knows in his heart that it is an extremely well done and superb bit of entertainment. The audience knows it too.

As great as it is, having things in the show that have a flawless feeling can pose a personal threat. The performer will find himself no longer wanting to do things that are not perfected. The adage is, “Once you’ve had the best, it is hard to settle for less.” He has experienced the power of crafted material. Now he does not want to do any other kind.

Upon first observation this may seem good. Is it not commendable that a person is determined to live by a lofty standard of performance? On second observation it is evident that this determination may doom the
performer to a stagnant kind of career. What he is doing now is all he will be doing for the rest of his life. Why? Because to craft things they must be dealt with first in an unperfected state. The very nature of crafting and perfecting requires a person to work while there are still flaws. If not flaws, there will be at least rough spots or weak areas that need attention. If one insists on only doing material that is already crafted he takes away from himself the opportunity to craft.

If a performer chooses to do this, if he or she is content to do the same act for the rest of his or her career, it is ok. For some this has been a way to success and happiness.

Others may not want to live that way. I like doing new things. I don’t want to lose the sense of accomplishment that comes from successfully taking on a challenge. Maybe I have a short attention span. Whatever it is, it is important to me to constantly be learning and growing. Therefore I have to try things in a show that I know are not as good today as they will be on a future day. I must live with the fact that at times when I am performing I am more conscious of the flaws in my material than any critic who might be watching. The flaws will not remain. I would not be trying the new thing if I did not think it had potential for greatness. But I must try it or it never will become great.

Bottom line: Being willing to do some non-crafted material is necessary for growth.
MAGICISM #37. Earn The Right To Do It Wrong

“You must earn the right to do it wrong” is a statement of unknown origin. I cannot recall whom I first heard say it, but I am confident that whoever it was had heard it from someone else long before repeating it to me. It suggests that there is room for breaking the normal rules of show business, but the room only exists after one understands and has learned to apply the established rules.

When I was young in magic, I attended many magic conventions that featured Jay Marshall. Eventually I came to know him as a friend. Several times I was able to share the stage with him (he was the star, I was only a supporting act). Jay was not always orthodox or politically correct on stage. More than once I heard him say things that were shocking…and yet they really weren’t shocking because it was Jay Marshall. He was wise like the fabled owl and knew how, in context of his credentials, age, and performance skills, to get great laughs from remarks that would be outrageous coming from the mouth of anyone else.

I doubt there has been anyone in magic in the past one hundred years who knew the rules of show business better than Jay Marshall. He knew the rules from the standpoint of being a magician, but also from having rubbed elbows with movers and shakers on many other levels in the entertainment world. Because he knew the rules so well, and more importantly knew why they existed and what was behind them, he could plot his own course and do his own thing without problems.
I will admit I am peeved by up and coming performers who think they can do like Jay Marshal did (or a similar seasoned professional does) when they do not know what he knew. They do not understand that the secret to Jay Marshal was not political incorrectness nor “colorful language”. It was his savvy. He did not just try to be funny, he genuinely knew how to be funny and how to be clever. Of course, he knew how to do great magic.

It is fair to say that one reason why he could get away with things that otherwise would have been viewed as unsuitable is he had earned the right to do so. He had proven himself.

That is the point: Prove yourself! Educate yourself about magic and show business. Learn how to do things correctly. When you discover what seems to be an adage or rule, before rejecting it make sure you understand why it exists. Hear advice and follow it. Even when advice seems old-fashioned or out of date, at least try it for a while. In time, after having a good grasp on the advice, you may develop the insight and skill to deviate from it. Look at doing this as a privilege to be earned.

There is no cheap route to performing success. There is a place for charting your own unique course to follow, but you still need to have studied the map.
MAGICISM #38. The Cost Of A Trick Rarely Corresponds To The Value

One year after graduating from college I was invited to return to perform at the annual alumni banquet. I had discovered magic while in college and was still new at doing shows, but somehow someone thought my program would be great entertainment for the event. I was excited about the opportunity, but also nervous. I was not sure I could give them the great show they deserved.

To give myself more confidence about the show I decided I should purchase a special trick. It would not just be another trick; it would be the trick that would make my show spectacular.

At that time in life I had very little money. The most expensive equipment I owned was a set of linking rings, which had cost me twenty dollars. So when I found a magician who was selling a dove production for one hundred dollars, I was impressed. I could not afford it, but I bought it anyway with the belief that it would guarantee the success of my show. It was taken home with enthusiasm.

But there was a problem. The trick did not work every time. In practice it misfired about as often as it did what is was supposed to do. This did not stop me from putting it into the closing spot of my show. Because it had cost me so much I knew it had to be my big finale.

As you may guess, during the actual show, after I built up this last trick I would do and even commented that it had cost me a lot of money to have it there to show the alumni, it misfired. There was no flash of light. No
dove appeared. It did nothing. I pushed the trigger mechanism a second time. Still nothing. I took the appearing cane I had produced earlier and poked at the trap in the device hoping the dove would be released. It did not work. Rather than ending with a bang, my show ended with a fizzle. I felt stupid.

People were kind and I survived the experience. I learned something as well. The fact that a trick comes with a high price tag does not mean it is a good trick. That same night I did a rope trick which had cost me three dollars (the “Professor’s Nightmare”). As far as the audience was concerned, that was a one hundred dollar trick. They were amazed and astonished.

As years have gone by I have noticed that I am not the only one who can be blinded by a price tag. Behind our own dealer table I have watched magicians show no interest in spending under fifty dollars for a marvelous trick like 20th Century Silks or under ten dollars for the truly baffling Rainbow Ropes and instead choose to put down much more money for the latest gimmicked card wonder or an impractical electronically rigged box that they probably will never use. They are doing like I did in the beginning. Thinking that a costly new item is required to make them a star.

When shopping for magic magicians will be wise to focus on value rather than cost. They will be wise to keep in mind that some economically priced tricks are wonderful while certain expensive tricks are nearly worthless.
MAGICISM #39. Love Your Audience

It is said that before the great Howard Thurston would walk on stage he would stand behind the curtain and say to himself, “I love my audience. I love my audience.” This was part of how he prepared himself to perform well. He reminded himself that what he would be doing was actually a kind of gift and blessing to those who would be watching.

Compare that to the attitude seemed to be possessed by a number of modern young magicians. They stand behind the curtain and as they think about the audience they say to themselves, “I am going to blow you away!” The focus is not on what they are going to do for the audience. It is on what they are going to do to the audience. To them the performance is not a gift; it is a conquest. At the end of it all they hope to feel like a conqueror that has demonstrated his magical prowess and convinced people to bow at his feet.

It is hard to be successful with such an attitude. Fundamentally the “I’m going to blow you away” approach establishes an antagonistic situation that suggests it is the task of the magician to fool people and the task of people to keep from being fooled. Unless something like this is handled perfectly, there will be winners and losers. If the magician achieves his goal, he will win and the audience will lose. Making your audience losers is a quick way to lose your audience.

Recently I attended a marvelous performance at Terry Evanswood’s Magic Theater in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. During the course of the show Terry commented to his audience that “Growing old is inevitable, but growing up is optional.” He went on to
encourage the audience to allow themselves to possess a child-like sense of wonder rather than worrying about how the tricks were done. Terry is never an adversary to the audience. He is always their friend. Among other things, a result of Terry’s style and approach is a full theater day after day nearly all year long. The public loves the show. I think one of the reasons why is the fact that Terry genuinely cares about them.

Thurston had it right. Terry has it right as well. The mysteries of the magician are not weapons for overcoming the minds of an audience. They are gifts to the audience. Magic is something to be shared, not something to be used to subjugate. The heart of the show should not be the magician versus the audience. It should be the magician joining with the audience for a grand and wondrous experience.

Of course the magician wants to amaze and confound his audience. To do this he or she must be a strong performer who demonstrates knowledge and abilities that others do not possess. The difficult balance to master is that of accomplishing such a thing without creating an adversarial relationship. To maintain proper perspective in this matter maybe we too should say it to ourselves. “I love my audience.”
MAGICISM #40. Know How To Bow

I believe I have mentioned before that my primary mentor in magic is Marvyn Roy. Years ago, during a coaching session, Marvyn said to me, “Duane, you don’t bow.” In response I told him I was not concerned about bowing. It was not important to me because I thought bowing would make the performer seem egotistical.

Marvyn smiled and then with the tremendous enthusiasm that has always characterized his magic and person said, “Ah, I see. You don’t know what a bow is!” He proceeded to give me a lesson I have never forgotten.

According to Marvyn a bow should mainly be viewed as a pause for applause. It is not an exaggerated posture, although on occasion such might be involved in a bow. It is an interruption to the action of performing that allows people to express their enthusiasm and approval.

As Marvyn talked to me about this I thought about my experience in conservative churches where applause is frowned upon. I have been in worship services of such churches where someone has sung a solo in a beautiful and inspiring manner. At the end of it I wanted to clap. Not because I felt a need to say to the singer, “You are great”, but because the song gave me a good feeling that I wanted to express. I wanted to applaud for mine own sake. I wanted to applaud because it would have felt good to do so. Since the church frowned on such things, I did not clap my hands. The fact that I felt the opportunity to express myself stifled meant the beauty and inspiration of the moment was cut short.

This recollection connected with what Marvyn was
telling me. The idea is that people enjoy expressing their feelings. This is why professional sporting events fill stadiums. People like watching what happens on the field, but they also like being able to cheer, shout, and support their team.

As a general truth, it makes people feel good to signify the fact that they are having a good time. Therefore a wise performer gives them the chance to do this. That is the purpose of a bow.

Once a performer realizes the purpose of a bow it becomes much easier to know how to do it. All one really needs to do is hold still in a manner that indicates that something is finished so if people feel like expressing themselves they know it is the right time to do so. If the trick was successful and reasonably entertaining, people will be glad to clap.

From Marvyn I learned that when a magical feat is finished I need to hold still. If I add to this stillness a smile and posture where my hands are up above my waist to show that at the moment there is nothing else for me to do it is essentially a bow. Over the years I have discovered that audiences are happy to be given these moments.

When done properly, a bow is not a request by the performer to receive acclamation, it is an opportunity given to the audience to express appreciation. It feels good to appreciate and it feels good to show it. Help your audience enjoy themselves. Know how to bow.
MAGICISM #41. Don’t Penalize The Punctual

One of my pet peeves is starting shows late to accommodate those who do not arrive on time. I realize there are times when it is necessary. Bad weather, traffic problems, and previous events, which have gone overtime, are examples of things that may make a late start acceptable. However I do not believe it is acceptable to start a show late simply because not enough people are there yet. I also think it is a bad thing to start shows late as a general way of doing things.

What is the problem with starting a show late? It disrespects those who make the effort to be there on time. They follow the plan and stay on schedule. The consequence for them is wasted time where they sit and wait with nothing to do. This may make them feel cheated. Even if they don’t feel cheated, there is a sense in which that is what is happening to them.

On the other hand people who disregard the schedule and pay little consideration to the planned performance time are still able to see the entire show. The wrong people get the reward. Those who do the right thing and arrive at the right time receive nothing but wasted minutes for their efforts. Those who ignore the right time and do the wrong thing (by arriving late) get all that they want.

This has consequences. It allows the show to be disrespected. In human life the lesser waits on the greater. A king does not wait to see a servant. A servant waits to see a king. A movie star does not wait for a fan; the fan waits for a movie star. When magicians are
willing to hold their shows until latecomers arrive, they are subtly giving the message that the show is not as important as the mundane affairs that people allow to get in the way of the schedule. What is more important? An extra cup of coffee or the magic show? A slow and lazy effort to pull oneself away from the evening news or the magic show? If we want people to value our shows we are not wise to let our shows wait on them.

People learn quickly when shows will wait on them. Once they learn this, they become even less motivated to get there on time. People also learn when a show does start on time whether or not they are there. They realize they will miss something if they do not stay on schedule so they do find ways to get there when they should.

It also seems true that once a show has the reputation for starting exactly at the planned time it becomes viewed in a more esteemed manner. Since people need to be there when they are supposed to be it must be something special.

The concept not to be missed is that when we respect those who arrive on time by doing the show as planned; our shows also gain respect.

One more thing about this: Often the people we work for do not do things on schedule so we are forced to go on late. Such is not our responsibility. When we are victims of circumstance we make the best of it. When we can control the circumstance, we should keep things on schedule.
MAGICISM #42. Spend Money On Your Assistant

It should be obvious that it is always nice to get a bargain and finding ways to save money is a good thing to do. I am not advocating wasteful or superfluous spending. I am suggesting that a magician should be just as willing to spend money on the assistant as he is on himself.

Magicians’ assistants deserve more respect than they usually receive. What they do is just as much an art and craft as is what the magician does. They are much more than “walking tables”. They add texture and character to the show. They are often essential to the magic itself. Just as a quarterback who throws the ball needs a receiver to catch it, magicians can rely on an assistant to complete a magical maneuver and make it into something spectacular.

Since the assistant is a valuable partner to a magician, he or she merits investment. It is foolish for a magician to spend whatever is necessary to make himself look right then ask his assistant to find costuming in a thrift store. It is ridiculous for a magician to make sure he receives whatever instruction necessary to do his effects correctly then expect the assistant to figure things out on his or her own.

I see two main reasons for investing in costuming, training, and whatever else an assistant needs.

The first is it reminds the magician himself of the importance of his partner. Because he is making an investment he will be more aware of what this helper (I prefer to say co-performer) is worth. Professional
performers typically understand the significance of the assistant. This “magicism” is not for them. It is amateur performers who frequently miss the point. I have seen many a male magician in the local magic club show expect his wife to “just know what to do” on stage and then become irritated when she does not do things properly. As well he has given her little or no guidance about “on stage apparel”. She does not feel good about herself and therefore does not want to be on stage in the first place. Her discomfort is evident to everyone and altogether it is a bad situation. The situation exists because the magician has disregarded rather than giving serious attention to the role of the assistant.

The second reason for investing in the assistant is it gives him or her esteem. Putting the proper costume and jewelry on a female assistant can help her feel attractive, even beautiful. When a person feels this way it is conveyed to the audience in posture and movement. The assistant will possess energy and charisma that adds much to the appeal of the show. The same is true for a male assistant. If he feels like he looks good he will be more confident on stage. How he stands and how he walks will reflect this confidence. A confident assistant has the potential for being a great assistant.

It is a simple matter. Treasure your assistant. The thing your show may need the most right now might not be another magic trick, it could be a new necklace or jacket for that person who works with you on stage.
MAGICISM #43. To Hold The Attention Of The Audience You Need To Have Your Own Attention

This observation was slow in coming. From the beginning of my career I have known it is critical to gain and maintain the attention of an audience. I think anyone in the entertainment business knows this. It was not until years later that I understood the necessity of having my own attention.

The realization dawned on me while doing a long series of school shows. Mary and I were doing the same show two and three times a day. I found myself losing interest in the show. The performances were no longer fun or even satisfying. I was just churning out one show after another. As this happened the quality of my performance diminished. I was still doing tricks correctly and vocalizing the script, but the lack of passion on my part seemed to be felt by the students. I was going through the motions of performing and they were just sitting through another assembly.

I forced myself to focus better on the shows. More important, I made a conscious decision to always enjoy my own shows. That’s the reason I was supposed to be doing magic in the first place: because I love doing it.

The decision brought to my mind a question, “What does it take to enjoy magic just as much after many years into it as one does when he first begins?” I confess I do not have a clever answer for the question, but I have found a couple of things to be helpful.

The first thing is that of putting something into every show that I really like. There are those who would
say that whether or not the magician likes his tricks is not the issue. The issue is, does the audience like the tricks. I have discovered that the magician does need to like his own tricks. There are some tricks, like the Botania flower production or “Professor’s Nightmare” rope trick that I do not particularly like because I have done them so many times; yet I continue to do them for sake of the audience. This is ok, but there must also be things in the show that I do like. Things that I like; because they are new to me or because there is a joke or line related to them that keeps me entertained. At times these things may entertain me more than they do the crowd. Yet these things are good for the audience because overall the audience gets a better experience and sees a better magician when I am having a good time too. The audience benefits when I do a few things “for me.”

The second thing I do is force myself to put at least two new tricks into my performance repertoire every year. I treat this as a distinct goal. I select appealing concepts and research them. I do this with awareness that research is not enough. Research is interesting, but it does not lead to change. Change is what keeps things stimulating. I make sure the research leads to experimentation and practice. The experimentation and practice puts two new things into the show. The new things may not be better than what I was doing before, but they are different. The difference helps me stay interested and enthused. Staying interested and enthused makes me a better magician.
MAGICISM #44. When It Comes To Mistakes Your Reaction Governs Their Reaction

It is common to hear this question posed in discussion sessions at magic conventions: *How Do You Handle Mistakes?* At times it seems the person posing the question is hoping for a magical answer. Something that will make mistakes so they are not mistakes after all. There is no such thing.

The only thing that might be considered a rule in defusing mistakes is this: Your reaction is the key. The audience will view the event the same way you do. If you convey disappointment, they are likely to be disappointed. If you act as if it is something that can be overlooked and the show is going to be good in spite of it, they will usually feel the same way.

I have heard experienced pros suggest that the best way to deal with a mistake is pretend like it does not happen. It is true that audiences normally do not notice mistakes unless we call attention to them.

However, behaving as if a mistake did not happen is not always the right thing to do. Sometimes mistakes are so glaring and obvious that to ignore them is to insult the intelligence of the audience. If the performer presses on as if nothing has happened, they will assume he is either an idiot or egomaniac.

In such situations we must address the mishap. Not with an explanation or excuse. Audiences do not like to hear such things. It is better to smile and make a light-hearted comment such as “*Nobody’s perfect.*”

One time on stage I rolled out a large camera
shaped box that was similar in effect to the classic “Doll House” illusion. I had purchased it from a magician friend who had made it in his home workshop. As the box neared center stage a leg suddenly broke off. The leg was quite long, about thirty inches, so the box crashed over on its side and the lid popped open. My wife was inside. This was evident to everyone in the audience. It would have been ridiculous for me to pick the box back up and go ahead with the presentation as if nothing had happened. Had I done so, the audience would have been embarrassed for me. They probably would have also concluded me to be an inept performer.

What did I do? I looked at the audience and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, this trick was supposed to be a surprise for you. It turned out to be a surprise for me!” They laughed. Then I looked down at my wife. She handled the matter even better than I. She waved her finger at me as if I was in big trouble, then looked at the audience to indicate I was going to get some grief after the show. This got more laughter. Finally we got Mary out of the busted prop. She bowed and I had the audience give her applause for all things she puts up with being married to a magician. The crowd loved it.

Afterwards many people talked as if the disastrous camera illusion was a highlight of the show. Some thought we planned for it to happen.

That is how to handle a mistake. Keep having fun. Don’t take it too seriously. If you are able to stay happy in spite of the problem, your audience will as well.
MAGICISM #45. Don’t Stay The Same

I must begin this magicism with a comment that some great acts in magic have stayed the same for decades and continued to do well. I appreciate and applaud them. It does seem possible to discover a concept and style that remains interesting to the public for a lifetime.

Having said that; I believe it is generally true that most acts need to change as time goes by. The principal reason for this is the fact that times change. Many years ago I did a trick with large LP records. One by one they would change color. A day came, while using the trick in a school show, when I heard children say, “What are those?” They did not recognize LP records so the trick did not mean much to them. They were of the generation that used CDs. When I changed the trick and started doing it with CDs instead of LPs it received a better reaction. (A few years later I changed the trick yet again. I switched from CDs to colorful rings. Again, the change was for the better).

Recently I watched video of magicians performing in the 1970’s. They wore pale blue Tuxedos and yellow ruffled shirts, which were popular, and cutting edge style at the time. Now the sight of a magician in a pale blue Tuxedo with a frilly yellow shirt is likely to be viewed as silly and even laughable.

Remember the classic picture of a magician holding up a rabbit by the ears? There was a day when that was acceptable. Nowadays, the crusading of animal rights groups and the general sentiment of society makes any action, which in the least manner hints at unkindness toward an animal, is something that will get the magician
in trouble. Back then you could hold a bunny just about any way you chose and no one cared. Today the situation is different.

The point is that society and culture changes as years go by; therefore a performer is normally wise to do the same.

Beyond the motivation of staying current with trends and moods of society, another reason for making changes and adjustments in performance style is the fact that the performer himself (or herself) also changes. It is doubtful that what works for an athletic looking twenty year old illusionist will work for the same person when he is slightly overweight, thin haired, and beyond fifty years in age. When appearance and physical ability changes, the performer needs to make adjustments.

Not long ago a person who had not seen me for at least ten years did approach me. One of the first things this person said was, “Where are your short sleeved suits?” This was reference to the fact that in earlier years of my career I wore jackets with the sleeves cut short to emphasize the fact that there was “nothing up my sleeves.” It was a good look for me at the time. Since then my look has changed. I tried to explain to the person that I deliberately change my look on stage every few years. Frankly, I was peeved when the person responded by saying he did not see why I would want to change anything. He said, “The way I saw you at the first is the way I would always like to see you.”

I know too many magicians who still are what they used to be…and it is a detriment. Their manner of dress, their music, and even their jokes are out of date. They are frustrated and discouraged by the fact that it is harder to get shows than it used to be; and when they do
get shows they feel their performances are not properly appreciated. They do not see that things are not working for them like they did before because the world is not the same as it was before. They fail to understand that living in the past makes it hard to find success in the present.

I deliberately change my costuming every few years. I also make it a goal to add at least one or two new tricks/routines to the show every year. As well, over the course of four or five years, I usually make some major changes in my music. I do this because I do not want my audiences to take me for granted and I do not want to take them for granted. Complacency can lead to stagnation. To remain sharp and continue to connect well with audiences a performer must constantly evaluate what he is doing. When adjustments are necessary, he must make them.

In concluding this line of thinking I will mention that my wife says sometimes the changes I make are not improvements. She suggests that I adjust some things to the point that they are not as good as they used to be. There may be times in my growth process as a performer when this is true. Overall however, because I refuse to stay the same, I believe I am a better performer today than I was years ago. I sincerely hope that years from now I will be yet better than I am in the present. It is part of the magic of being a magician; the constant quest to discover, develop, and improve. We are chasers of the “impossible dream”. We are those who look at the impossible and then find ways to make it seem to happen. That attitude does not match well with being content to do it as it has always been done. It meshes best with a spirit that says, “I have more to achieve, I have not yet arrived, I am loving the fact that there is so
much more yet to accomplish.”

“I don’t see magic as a matter of fooling people. I see it as giving them the gift of wonder”.

(Duane Laflin)
FINAL THOUGHT

Substance is more important than style. No matter how clever a manner in which something is done, if it is something not worth doing, the effort is a waste of time. On the other hand; if something is worth doing, it is good to do it even when presentation style is lacking.

The matter does not end there. If something is worth doing at all, it should be done well enough to convey the significance involved.

This applies to doing magic and to the process of writing. Writing something worthwhile is what is most important. However, people may not see and understand that something is worthwhile unless it is written fairly well.

Writing is not easy for me. I write, rewrite, and then rewrite some more. It seems no matter how many times I rewrite, I am never satisfied. I finally get to the point where I tell myself, “There still may be a better way to say it, but it is time to turn it over to readers with the belief that they will get the message in spite of the author’s imperfections.”

I hope I have said things well enough to make the substance of my “magicisms” evident.

Duane Laflin
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For information about the Montana Wonder Theater see www.montanawondertheater.com

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