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Magician as Actor or Actor as Magician: It's Never Easy

By Mark Panner, on September 30th, 2005



The online journal [Backstage.com](#) considers the challenges and lessons to be learned by cross-training as an actor and magician. The oft-repeated maxim of Robert-Houdin, “A magician is an actor playing the role of a magician,” is not mentioned — which is strange. Nor is the maxim of lesser-appreciated Li'l Tom Hardy cited, “an actor will roll a magician for any cash he's got.”

But the article does get to the lick-log of the issue. Should you use skills developed in your hours of practicing in front of the mirror on stage when you are no longer looking at your reflection but a paying audience.

Three scenarios are considered.

The first involves Los Angeles-based actor J. Todd Adams. Although his role in his most recent play did not require him to learn magic, he thought it would be helpful to play his character. The play's script identified his character as a magician who had performed in the past.

The play's director hired a “magic consultant,” Ken Sonkin.

The consultant taught Adams—who hadn't done tricks since he was a kid—half a dozen illusions, including making milk vanish in a glass, creating fire that “travels” to a book another character is reading, changing a silk scarf from one color to another, levitating a champagne glass, and producing two red roses from nowhere. I was duly dazzled and hadn't a clue how he did it all.

But the tough part is translating the work of a magician to **acting**.

Mr. Adams was also required to play the piano during the show.

It was hard to know what to focus on during rehearsal. If I tried to do the trick right, the acting would go to hell. So for a while I had to focus on the magic and forget the acting, which was frustrating. I sort of felt like an observer watching myself sometimes.

Mr. Adams hit the wall all who practice and perform magic hit: he hit that wall as an actor, however.

He found performing the magic in way that made it appear to be relaxed and second nature was tougher than anticipated.

“Even though they weren't complicated tricks,” he says. The tricks would look fine at home in front of the mirror, not so fine at rehearsal.”

The other end of the Magician – Actor spectrum is San Francisco actor Christian Cagigal (rhymes with “magical”).

Mr. Cagigal began as a magician and worked his way into acting. He recalls when he was 11-years-old. ”

Whole winter vacations melted away as he stood in front of the mirror with a pack of cards and a library book. “I was the pipsqueak only child with glasses and no friends. It was a form of expression,” he says. Big guys at school would say, “Hey, magic man, show me a trick.”

The reporter noted with a sense of sadness, “Magicians never tell, and actors who learn tricks for a show are sworn to secrecy. Even co-actors who help with the tricks often don't know all the details.”

Mr. Cagigal wanted to learn acting to help his magic, “to bring more soul to his magic performance.” This path took him through San Francisco State where he earned a B.A. in Theatre Arts.

Mr. Cagigal suggests there is a decided difference between the aims of a magician and that of an actor: “Acting is about being open, honest, present in the moment, not hiding,” he says. “Magic is about deceit for your entertainment pleasure. It’s about the illusion of honesty.”

We thought his insight on this difference was outstanding:

As a magician, I’m always aware and always four steps ahead of the audience. As an actor, I play director. Where do I have to go emotionally? Is what I’m doing helping the audience get what the writer and the director want to say? What’s the image being given to the audience, and how do I fit into this grand scheme?

Also, as a magician, he is comfortable being in two places at once. He or she needs to be in the moment, as well as engaging in purely technical activities.

This gives him an advantage, as he can deal with lines and direction and hitting marks while staying calmly present. When he came to acting he found he had to train himself not to over-plan what he’d do onstage. And that’s where acting helped his magic act, aiding him in connecting with his partner, which is the audience, and playing with them—“bringing a little chaos into my magic in a good but scary way.

The consultant to the stars, Mr. Sonkin has worked with a number of actors hoping to find their magician character.

He is a performer at the Magic Castle in Hollywood, the Comedy and Magic Club in Hermosa Beach; and most recently was involved in bringing magic effects into *Seussical the Musical* in Solano County. What does a magic consultant do? He tries to match the tricks to the actors’ abilities.

He looks at the size of their hands (for tricks involving hiding things in the palm), and he notes whether they can play a musical instrument (which means good hand-eye coordination and a sense of rhythm and timing, all useful qualities in magic) and whether they have dance, movement, or martial arts backgrounds (suggesting enough body awareness so that if Sonkin says, “To mask this illusion, you’ll need to turn three-quarters,” they’ll get it). Magic in its purest form is a dance with your hands. Acting and magic are both illusions; when done well, you don’t see the homework.

Mr. Sonkin works with actors to use magic as part of their acting rather than divide their time on stage between playing a magician and a character. The article quotes British actor-magician Ian Saville on the similarity between the role of actor and magician.

“The central thing in magic is misdirection, which is...very similar in some ways to some of the things that Stanislavsky was talking about,” Mr. Saville says. “The circle of attention for the actor is similar in some ways to the way the magician manipulates the direction of attention of an audience.”

The deception is impossible without the skills and practice necessary “to be completely natural in their movement; thus they have to observe others and themselves in real life, to see exactly how people do normal, everyday things—just as actors must observe those tiny details of human activity.”

Mr. Cagigal says actors are instructed to avoid watching themselves in a mirror. Magicians, on the other hand, are advised to use the mirror intensively. “Look in the mirror,” says Cagigal. “See if you can fool yourself. After all, fooling yourself—into believing in the circumstances of the script is what acting is all about.”

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