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The Art of Simplification

The longer I am into magic the more I find myself using simple tricks with an easy to understand plot and a straightforward effect. Discussing this point with other professional colleagues, who have been practicing magic for many years, I find most agree on this point. In this respect I'm often reminded of Michelangelo, who was asked how he would conceive his beautiful statues. He answered, "I look at the block of marble and I see the statue inside - then I just chip off whatever is too much."

I like to look at this as a double analogy. First, it is a beautiful way of saying so much with so little words. Second, it reflects the procedure used to refine a piece of magic, be it an original piece, which is very rare, because it doesn't happen often in one's life, or a personal interpretation of an existing piece, which is very hard, because it requires time and dedication.

If all the thoughts referring to simplification had to be reduced into a simple recipe they could probably be best expressed in Schopenhauer's words, "Use ordinary words to express extraordinary things." This is supreme advice from one of the great thinkers in the history of civilization. He obviously was referring to expressing philosophical thoughts in written form, but it can be applied to method, effect structure, presentation, text and everything else.

From Complex to Simplex

Einstein said, "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." However, simplification rarely strikes first. Especially if you are a beginner, you are not looking for simplification; you want to do the difficult and the complicated stuff. In my own experience I have often gone through complication before coming back to simplification. In order to simplify one has to recognize the essence of something and then find the courage to leave out everything else, which pleases the playful child in ourselves, especially when we are amateurs at heart, who love the method better than the effect. This is very much in the spirit of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's dictum, "Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."

The real challenge is to simplify without becoming trivial. I tend to believe, that if one is striving for simplicity before having gone through years of complication, one will choose the simple way because of laziness, ignorance and other unworthy qualities, and one will probably end up doing trivial magic. Whereas if one decides to adopt the path of simplicity after having spent at least a decade researching and practicing the complicated and difficult, one is just looking at the same thing but from another level. It is said that we advance by coming back, because we progress in spirals. Maybe that's a sign of artistic maturity, or as Pestalozzi used to say, one of the most important pedagogues, "You are mature when you do something in spite of your parents having said so."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the famous German literary genius, is said to have written a long letter to a friend, at the end of which he remarked, "Dear friend, please forgive me for having written such a long letter, but I didn't have time to write a shorter one." I truly believe that the time spent to simplify things will always be rewarded.

Fred Kaps — Simply Beautiful

As an example of masterful simplification I would like to tell you about the folded card in box, and how Fred Kaps did it. Essentially a selected and signed card is found folded up in a box, which has been in view all the time. This has meanwhile become a great classic in the cardician's repertoire.

Only few know that the originator of this beautiful effect is the German amateur magician Bruno Hennig, better known under his stage name of Joro. He tells me that it was in 1958 when he and Fred Kaps attended a Matinée show by the late Kalanag and then met for a talk. It was then that Joro performed his folding card to box and his floating cork for these two giants of magic. As many will know, the floating cork effect made it into a commercial item sold by the late Ken Brooke, while the folded card to box remained essentially a performance piece. Since it had become one of his favorite effects it also became associated throughout the magical world with the late Fred Kaps, although Kaps always made it a point to credit the true creator whenever he talked with magicians about this particular effect. Whoever saw Fred Kaps perform it live or on video will agree that in his hands it was a miracle.

Click on the link below, and you will see a clip of Fred Kaps performing the trick for Bro. John Hamman, at the house of Philippe Fialho in the Seventies:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-Mtu1KAu98

This effect is one of the great classics of card magic, without doubt. Not only is the effect very clear and direct, it can also be performed under almost any performing situation and on almost any platform. I could even see Nate Leipzig perform this effect for his committee of four and project it to a thousand people in his auditorium.

I never had the privilege of seeing Fred Kaps perform it live, but am told by several friends that the version you can see in the clip is the one they saw him use most often for magicians and laymen alike.

Actually the method and presentation were as straightforward as you could imagine. Let's discuss it here with focus on the subject of "artistic simplification:

Fred Kaps spread the cards face up and had Brother John Hamman select any card and sign it on the face.

Upon taking it back, Kaps controlled the card to second from the top of the deck using his subtle handling of the Bluff Pass (see Card College Volume 3 pp. 555 for some of the details Kaps used). After showing that the card was neither on top nor on bottom, the selection ended up on top of the deck.

He turned the deck casually face up and executed the Mercury Card Fold (see Expert Card Technique p. 303, or Card College Volume 5, p. 1354) as he made a humorous remark. Then he pointed to the box and explained that it contained a prediction. As he made some further comments the deck with the folded card hidden beneath it was transferred to the right hand, which momentarily held it, and then gave it back to the left hand – this action subtly showed both hands empty. While the left hand naturally dropped to the tabletop with the folded card in finger palm, the right hand ribbon spread the deck face up on the table – he did not point out that the card was still in the deck.

Kaps would then take the box from the table, briefly deposit it over the folded card in the left hand in order to flip the hinged cover of the box open. He then immediately took the opened box with his right hand, showed the face down card rattling it slightly inside the box and then immediately performed the Shuttle Pass to apparently dump the box's content into his left hand, really displaying the previously folded card.

He continued talking about this still face down folded card being a prediction and emphasized several times that it came out of the box – he really took his time to unfold the card and then show the signature. Eventually the opened card was handed to Brother John Hamman who shows an expression of sincere amazement on his face.

The Essence of Simplicity

As you can see the staging was very direct, an approach typical of Fred Kaps's work. Still, through sheer personal presence, straightforward construction, perfect and invisible technique, masterful handling and sensible choice of effect, he created a stronger impact on his audiences than many who say they are making trivial tricks more meaningful by adding almost endless stories and thus cluttering up the essential effect.

Another name that comes to mind with a similar approach to the presentation of magic as Fred Kaps is the late Michael Skinner whose texts most of the times were of an explanatory nature, some will say almost trivial, but whose magic was as strong as you could wish for. This certainly is something to be thought about.

And this brings me to the end of this little essay on a complex (!) subject. I would like to leave the farewell to the famous French impressionist painter Auguste Renoir (1841-1919). His last words are supposed to have been, „I think I gradually start to understand something about art.” Renoir possessed the attitude, which is the mark of the true artist, namely the life-long commitment to always learn new things.