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## Charlie Miller's Wisdom

You might find it easy to agree if I say that by listening to the great Masters of Magic of the past you can only learn.

And nothing is too trivial as not warrant to be reconsidered from time to time – this especially holds true for beliefs we have been attached to over a long time.

Reconsidering them and finding them still appropriate reconfirms, strengthens and reinforces our current position and makes us stronger. If, on the other hand, they are found to no longer be valid, even if only to some degree, a reconsideration is necessary to create restored or even new, healthy, strong beliefs that work.

The successful magic and mime team of T. Daniel and Laurie Willets, who are based in Chicago, in 2002 gave a lecture at the Zauberring Basel in Switzerland titled “What Charlie Miller Taught Me”. At the end of their lecture notes are listed 17 points that Charlie Miller used to make when teaching magic to his pupils. It is with the kind permission of T. Daniel and Laurie Willet that I will reproduce Charlie Miller's advice followed by a few comments of mine.

There is nothing among these pieces of advice that you and I wouldn't already know, either because we've heard them before or because we have acquired them through hard gained experience. Still, it might be useful to review the obvious from time to time (see above).

If you can get hold of *The Charlie Miller Lecture Notes*, which were published in 1967 by Magic Inc., Chicago, you will find more wonderful ideas than you can ever use.

### The Advice

Here then is Charlie Miller's advice (**in bold**) plus my comments below in form of bullet points:

#### 1. **Always strive for simplicity in both effect and method. Make the effect easy for the spectator to follow.**

- This reminds me of what Dai Vernon used to say, “The difference between an amateur and a professional is that the latter knows what an effect is.”
- Miller's advice is also the definition of a classic: make it easy for the spectator, so he can tell what you did in one or two sentences to somebody else later. It doesn't matter if he's using more sentences, as long as he can tell what you did at all. With too many presentations the audience doesn't even remember what has been done, let alone tell it.
- Simplicity in method and effect makes for beauty and elegance, too. This is the esthetics of artistic magic.

- We progress in spirals, coming back to the same point, but looking at it from above, from the perspective of maturity. When we start in magic, we do the simple things, because we don't know anything else. Then we go through complication, because we think this is the way to progress. Eventually we come back to simplicity, because this is the way of purity.

**2. Learn the mechanics of the trick first. Master all the sleights and know the trick well. Then work on the presentation.**

- This is particularly true when studying items from books, but also from video. Especially advanced readers, because of their already acquired knowledge, will quickly read over the explanation and think they have understood, while in reality they might be missing vital details. I'm reminded of Ascanio's seven steps of how to study of a card trick:
  1. Understanding
  2. Practice
  3. Correction
  4. Corrective training
  5. Mastery
  6. Internalization and full command
  7. Perfection (s. *Card College Volume 2*, pp. 477 for a detailed explanation of each step).
- Too many consider the presentation to be the most important issue to work on, whereas it is first important to decide on a very good trick (effect), then to come up with the best method to protect the secret. It is only after these two complex issues have been solved that it is necessary to come up with a good staging and presentation. It is not that one thing was more important than the other – nothing could be further from the truth - but it is a matter of priorities. There is, in my opinion, no shortcut that leads directly to presentation and performance. See my essay on the Magic Pyramid in *Card College Volume 4*.

**3. Read as many magic books as you can. Charlie preferred magic books written for the public because of their simplicity.**

- What a brilliant piece of advice the second sentence harbors. Have you ever thought of it this way? To these books for the public (Henry Hay, Bruce Elliot etc.) I would add books with the material of magicians who performed a lot for difficult audiences (such as bar magicians Matt Schulien, Eddie Fechter, Jim Ryan, Karl Norman, etc.).

**4. Write the order of your show or your act on a card that you can see and read. Place this card where you can see it, on the floor, behind a prop or some such place.**

- We all used to do this, I suppose. Especially useful for the amateur, who will perform different tricks for the same audience, whereas the professional keeps doing the same tricks for different audiences. However, this is of great utility even to the professional when doing lectures for magicians as well as for laymen, or when doing specially scripted presentations at product launches, kick-off meetings or at trade shows.

**5. Rehearse the trick before showing it to the public.**

- Couldn't be more obvious, could it? Nonetheless it has happened to me that after so many years of experience I have become so self-confident that I thought I could do a certain trick the next day I learned it – how wrong I was. Even if you are an expert it is

necessary to rehearse a piece over a certain period before bringing it to an audience. Virtuosity is reached when one masters the technique and the instruments (props), not vice versa.

- To this piece of advice I would add mental rehearsal, which is something I use very often. On the way to the show and while waiting to go on, I mentally run through various situations at real time speed, if possible standing and doing the gestures in pantomime. This increases confidence and is a very useful exercise against stage fright, which keeps being a big issue regardless of what level you have reached.

## **6. Practice until the routine is perfect and then practice some more.**

- See Ascanio's seven steps to study mentioned under point 2 above. It also reminds me of the nice story which tells that the ancient Persians always made a little mistake when they weaved their carpets, because they believed that perfection is reserved for God. And it equally reminds me that perfection is like a star in the sky – you cannot touch it, but if the traveler follows it, he will ultimately reach his goal.

## **7. Work slowly – never rush a trick or your presentation.**

- I used to think that this is only an amateur problem, who wants to get the trick over as quickly as possible – either because he wants to get to his next trick (exhibitionism), or because he thinks that what he does is not so interesting after all (lack of experience and self-confidence). But I have noticed many professionals over the years, who have accelerated their pacing to such a degree, that they have lost all the beauty in handling and presentation they used to have. This might be because they have been doing the same trick for a thousand times and lost the audience's perspective, or it might be because they have been working certain commercial venues where the audience doesn't have too much time to listen. We should reconsider our pacing from time to time and rediscover the beauty of being slow. This is true for magic, for eating and ... well, I'm sure you can find other areas of life to apply this idea to.

## **8. Watch magicians perform – all kinds of magicians, for you can always learn something.**

- On this subject the great Confucius once wrote, "If you see a worthy man, imitate him. If you see an unworthy man, examine yourself." This has to be among the highest degree of wisdom, and it is so concise.

## **9. Perform tricks that you like. Like what you are doing because this will develop a rapport with the audience.**

- As Picasso said, and Ascanio would repeat to me in many of our conversations, "The merchant does what he can sell. The artist sells what he does." Indeed: The merchant is using marketing to essentially take something from people (money), while the true artist is creating an experience to give to his audience by sharing what he has devoted his life to.
- You don't need to be a professional to live this, quite on the contrary, as an amateur, who doesn't need to make money out of magic, you can just do the magic you personally like most, without having to care to "entertain" them or make them laugh (which is what many think makes a good performance – I don't think that this has to be necessarily so).

## **10. Find tricks that are not critical to angles.**

- Let's never, never forget that as performers we are creating false realities, fiction, ideally art, in the mind of the audience, and let's be aware that every moment creates an idea *and* an emotion. We are the architects and directors of these moments.
- Always keep two things in mind: first, the effect must be very good, second, the method as well as its execution must be impenetrable. If even one spectator in the audience sees something pertaining to the method, the illusion is destroyed.
- Identify every move that is critical to angles and learn exactly where the bad angles are and how to cover them, either with your body or with excellent misdirection, ideally using both in elegant and absolutely unsuspecting combination. Failing to do that, change the moment – or the method.

## **11. Magic should be dignified.**

- Each time I take the deck out of the card case I try to remind myself that I'm taking out a Stradivari and that Johann Nepomuk Hofzinger, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin and Dai Vernon are watching me. Difficult – but I keep trying.
- Stay away from cheap jokes, corny lines, insulting actions. Always ask yourself if what you do is what you are, then do it with dignity, with respect towards yourself, the spectators and the patrimony of magic.

## **12. Humor should come from mystery and the situation of the trick rather than the patter of the magician.**

- Dai Vernon kept repeating this and I couldn't agree more, "There is no room for comedy in magic except that arising out of a situation."
- In my opinion it is a poor idea to put any type of "comedy" on top of a trick. I think that for most styles of magic it is much better to search for the humor inherent in each specific trick and try to work it out in a personal way – like a sculptor works out a statue that has been inside the block of marble from the beginning of time.
- Adding unrelated humor to a trick will more often than not have an artificial flavor, whereas using inherent humor is enhancing what already is. This reminds me of bad chefs who are using inferior products because they are cheaper and easier to get and then try to enhance them with synthetic spices, industrially produced convenience sauces and eye-popping, complex presentations on the plate, whereas the star chef will take the best products and try to enhance their own flavor, never combining more than three things, flavors and colors on a plate. One strives for form, the other for content. Go for both, but put content before form.

## **13. Use props that are familiar to the audience.**

- As soon as the spectator thinks that the prop we are using is the cause of the effect, there can be no magical experience. The performance is then just a curiosity where the performer has the advantage over the audience that he knows how it's done and they don't. This is one of the problems with Tenyo-type tricks – as wonderful and ingenious as the props are in conception and method, the fact that they are made in plastic and therefore recognizably widely available, removes any magical quality – they are still good as conversation pieces, ice breakers, puzzles or collector's items, but in my opinion will never create a magic experience.

**14. Go through your pockets and list all items, then learn how many of these items you can use in a trick.**

- This is such a fantastic idea! I have started several times to list not only the objects in the pockets, but also what we wear and carry (watch, finger ring, tie, cuff links, button holes, shoe strings etc.) but never thought this through to the last consequence. One idea that came out of this exercise, however, was to use the things we have on and in our clothes as a card index. For instance you ask a spectator to name any card (maybe use some known strategy to narrow it down). He says Four of Hearts and you know that on your left cuff link you have a Four of Hearts symbol. Pretend not to hear what he just said, take your cuff link and have the spectator hold it in his closed fist. Have him repeat the card – apparently name it for the first time – and concentrate on the cuff link you just gave. When he opens his hand he will be amazed to see the name of the Four of Hearts. This is just a most simple application; if you think along these lines you might come up with great and practical performance pieces.

**15. Do not stay on too long – let them want more.**

- Easy said, isn't it? But so hard to live by! We are sharing a part of ourselves when we perform. And we have practiced over so many years, and have so much material, and feel we are so important. Nonetheless it is fundamental to accept that to other people magic means less than it does to us.

**16. Have three tricks that you can do anywhere, anytime and under any conditions. They could appear to be impromptu.**

- The rule of three has stood the test of time: a fascinating opener, an excellent longer trick in the middle, and then a memorable finale. Also, sets of three are easier to remember, as Michael Skinner always used to point out.
- The second sentence hints at the fact that impromptu magic can very well be prepared in advance. This reminds me of Nate Leipzig, who always had a few props in a gentleman's tray (you still find these in leather shops): When he left home he put everything in its place in his suit, when he returned home he put all the props back into the tray – thus he was always ready to perform a few things.
- However, on the subject of "always being prepared to perform", I'm also reminded of René Lavand who when asked to perform will tell a spectator to come to see his show! I have a friend who when asked to do "a little trick" will answer by handing the asker his business card with the information that they can book him for their next private party. I mean, would you ask somebody to look into your mouth when you learn he's a dentist?
- Here is a little true story on the subject, which Bernard Bilis told me during one of those wonderfully copious dinners we share when I visit him in Paris: In his early days the famous French comic actor Luis de Funes was invited to a dinner given by the not less famous French banker Baron de Rothschild. At the end of the meal Rothschild said to de Funes, "Cher Luis, you are such a funny man, why don't you tell us a little funny story?" To which de Funes answered without missing a beat, "Cher Baron, you are such a rich man, why don't you write a little check for each of us?"
- Admittedly it can be charming to occasionally give in to a spontaneous request and perform some impromptu magic, but as a rule I would advise, "Think twice." Unfortunately experience has shown that more often than not people who have such a request will just use you to show off in front of others, like saying, "Look at my dog – he can do a little trick." We don't need this and neither does our art (remember point 11 about dignity).

**17. Avoid any tricks that require too much setup, tricks that require pieces set on different tables.**

- This is a typical professional's advice. To this I would add to do all possible preparation and setup already at home before going to the venue of the performance. And to pack everything including dress, table, technical (sound & light) equipment and props so that you can transport them in one go and with two hands.

I sincerely believe that these pieces of advice Charlie Miller left us, are of such tremendous importance and use, that we will be well advised to look at them from time to time. I predict that each time we do this, we will find something to put into practice.

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