

The Chinese Sticks by Fred Kaps (and Roberto Giobbi)

Before becoming a professional in 1988, and years thereafter, I used to open my stand-up performance with the Chinese Sticks. At the FISM convention in 1979 in Brussels they had for the first time a closed-circuit TV system that allowed conventioners to watch videos in the halls in front of the show rooms.

On one occasion I caught Fred Kaps (1926 – 1980) performing his Chinese Sticks in his TV show “The Fred Kaps Show”, and this caused a veritable paradigm shift in me: Although I had been practicing magic for six years already (!) and was member of several magic clubs, I had never seen anybody before handle a small apparatus in such a natural and disarming way. Had I not known the mechanism of the sticks, I wouldn’t even have dreamed that they could be gimmicked, so nonchalant and elegant was Kaps’ handling of them.

I immediately fell in love with the trick, but it wasn’t until a few years later that I got hold of the video and transcribed Kaps’ text word for word and learned it by heart. In other words: I stole his patter and presentation! In the subsequent months and years, I took the trick to a non-magic and to a magic director and spend lots of time (and money!) studying its presentation in all its facets.

Although I did eventually add quite a few original lines – all the foreign language shtick is mine, of course - bits of business and even adapted the finale to my needs, this essentially remains Fred’s trick and presentation. It is one of my great regrets in life not to have met him personally, when I had a chance to do so as a young man. But in view of the fact that he has left us more than 30 years ago now, and that I stopped performing the trick in the early 1990ies, I would like to offer my script of the trick as an homage to one of the greatest magical artists who ever lived – Fred Kaps.

Roberto Giobbi’s Script for Chinese Sticks (Fred Kaps)

Enter with Chinese Sticks held together in the right hand. Mine, like those Fred Kaps used, were of real bamboo, with red tassels and fairly large red wooden beads and looked very good. One cord is drawn-in, the other pulled out, but wound around both sticks.

“What I’m about to show you is not so much a magic trick than rather a puzzle, an ancient Chinese riddle. Of course, there are a few rules, which you must know. First you need two Chinese bamboo sticks of the same size. It’s very important that they are exactly the same size – especially the one on the left.”

Unwind the long cord and let it drop.

“Each stick has a cord attached to it – a short one and a long one. This is the long one.”

Take the long cord and show it. Keep the cord with the pompon showing in the hand, but do not look yourself at the pompon as you say:

“On each cord there is a green pompon attached to it. Beg your pardon? Of course, it’s red, I can see that, too. I just wanted to see if you paid attention. The color actually doesn’t matter at all – as long as it is red.”

Point to beads.

“Oh, lest I forget: After the show people often come up to me and ask, ‘Roberto - by the way, that’s me – what about the red beads? Well, that’s very simple. The red beads are a tiny bit larger than the holes in the sticks – otherwise the cords would fall through.’”

As this is said, seize the bead of the long cord and pull it up and down a few times.

“And the puzzle I want to show you now is as follows: If you pull the right pompom, the left pompom goes up, and when you pull the left pompom, the right pompom goes up. Et Voilà!”

Take a step back, lift both arms to applause pose and look into the audience smiling, as if you had just performed an inexplicable miracle.

“I must congratulate you – you are a very tolerant audience. In return I would like to tell you what the two red beads are good for – I always forget to explain that. Beg your pardon? I already did? Did you hear that? The gentleman over there just said to the lady next to him, ‘Sure, there must be a connection between the two sticks. But I can assure you, Madame, there is no connection at all, nothing here and nothing there.’”

Separate the sticks at the front, keeping them together at the back, and move the left hand up and down between the sticks at the front.

“Nothing above, nothing below.”

“Nonetheless – if you pull the right pompom, the left pompom goes up, and if you pull the left pompom, the right pompom goes up.”

Without missing a beat point at the beads, saying:

“You’re probably wondering what the two red beads are for – I sometimes forget to mention that. These beads – beg your pardon? I’ve already said so? Oh, I see – did you hear that? That gentleman over there says to the lady next to him, ‘There must be a connection at the back.’” But I can assure you: if there was a connection, I would obviously see it. Who’s laughing? Do you perhaps also believe that there is a connection back there? Well, I should not have thought that of you! But I can assure you....

Separate the sticks.

‘...back here there is no connection at all. Nonetheless – if you pull the right pompom, the left pompom goes up, and when you pull the left pompom, the right pompom goes up.’

Repeat, and then *immediately* continue talking.

...Oh, by the way, did I already tell you what the red beads are here for? You see, the red beads are completely independent from each other.

Pull the beads.

“This bead over here has absolutely nothing to do with the bead over there. In British English: they are independent and in splendid isolation. In German: Eine Unabhängigkeitserklärung!” Pronounce in jerky Prusso-German.

“I once had a show in Paris. There I said: Mesdames et Messieurs, c’est le tour du pompon qui pend et le pompon qui ne pend pas. Lorsqu’on tire le pompon qui pend, le pompon qui pendait ne pend plus et le pompon qui ne pendait pas maintenant pend.

“In Sevilla I performed at the World Fair. That was even more difficult – in Spanish – and my Spanish is so bad. So here is how I did it: Pom-pom-pom-pero-porom-porom-pom-pero-porom-pom-pom-pom-pero-porom-pompom!”

This is a very popular tune everybody knows or has heard (enter “el porompompero” in your search engine and listen to the refrain in the song). As you sing pull the pompoms several times so the other one goes up.

Address a spectator:

“You may pull yourself, if you like – it works...

Approach a spectator so that everyone can see what is about to happen. Spectator pulls, but the other cord doesn’t go up. Now both cords are pulled out. Finish the sentence with much chagrin in your voice:

“...one hundred percent...”

Walk back, pull at both extended cords, but of course nothing happens. Look back and forth at the cords and at the spectator:

“You made it kaput! Never mind – this always happens. But maybe it is still under guarantee.”

Look a bit closer at one of the sticks, seeming to read something.

“Made in Taiwan! You know what? Since it’s kaput, I might as well tell you how it’s done. Or would you rather think about it? I mean it’s very clever, if you know how it’s done....and I know how it’s done!

Apparently march off, but then laugh and come back.

“Well, if you promise not to tell anybody else, I’ll let you into the secret.”

Pretend to start the explanation, but interrupt.

“I mean, those sitting on the far left probably saw how it’s done, and its really kind of you that you didn’t say anything. But if you don’t mind, we’ll tell the others, too. You see, I had a third stick hidden all the time.

Hold the two Chinese sticks with your left hand in a v-formation, and with your right hand take the mini-stick out of your pocket and display it (wait 3 seconds).

“And if you pull this pompom – the other two pompoms go up. Et Voilà!”

You are in perfect applause pose with the two regular sticks in your left hand and the mini-stick in your right hand. Eventually put the mini-stick on top of the two squared regular sticks, wind the extended cords around everything and place aside. Don’t forget them at the end of the show...