

THE GENII SESSION

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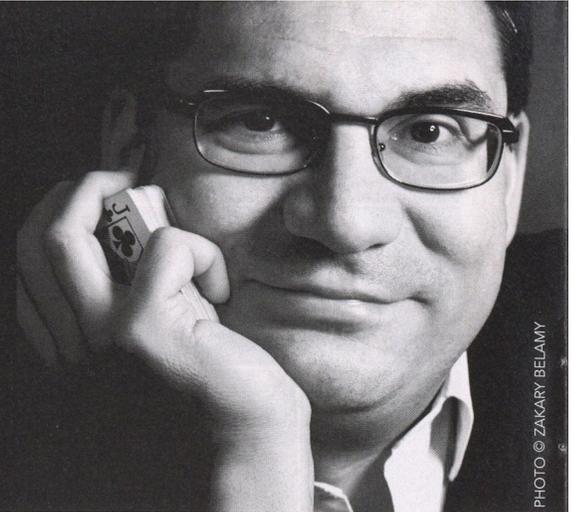


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TO BE, OR NOT TO...

THE MAGICIAN IS NOT AN ACTOR PLAYING THE ROLE OF A MAGICIAN

IN MY GENII COLUMNS, I've mentioned on several occasions Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin's quote about the conjuror being an actor playing the part of a magician, and I've also hinted at the fact that I do not fully subscribe to it, at least not for all magicians and not for all cases. Before proceeding I would like to repeat something I've already mentioned several times before in my columns, but which warrants repetition, namely that anything you're getting in these columns is of course just *my personal opinion*. Especially with a big question such as whether a magician should be an actor in order to be a good magician, when there are people in magic who are more famous and earn more money than me who would tell you exactly the contrary. As an old Zen Master once said: "They are right." Now, I maintain the contrary, as you will see, and I hope the Zen Master would find I'm right, too.

Since Robert-Houdin's famous quote that "a conjuror is an actor playing the part of a magician" was first published in 1868 in its original French form, "*un prestidigitateur n'est point un jongleur; c'est un acteur jouant un rôle de magicien*," on p.28 of Robert-Houdin's landmark book *Comment on devient sorcier*, it has been quoted by large and small authorities to support the belief that in order to be a good magician you also, and first of all, have to be a good actor.

Personally, I don't believe that this is so. On the contrary, if you try to act in the sense of the actor, in my opinion and experience, you have the best chance not to be a

good magician, for to act in the actor's sense, you will very likely appear contrived, unnatural, and uncommunicative because you will seem artificial. You and I will personally know several professional actors, singers, and directors who are good amateur magicians. But I think that the actual reason why they are so good is because they *understand magic* and have some magic-specific talent, not because they are actors. Some might argue that I couldn't know this, and say that they are good because they are professional actors. To those I will say that I also know professional doctors, lawyers, and plumbers who are excellent (mostly amateur) magicians. Would you say that it is because they are doctors, lawyers, or plumbers that they are good? Since it's not the point of this essay to show that I'm right and others are wrong, I'll leave the question open and simply say that the best amateur (call them part-time professionals if you will) and professional magicians

I know and admire, such as Tamariz, Lavand, Daniels, Jay, Williamson, Anderson, or Tabary have never been actors (with the exception of Ricky Jay, but he became an actor after already having been an outstanding magician).

In the tradition of a dialectic discourse I will, however, also say that I think we're better performers and will have a more professional, effective, and memorable performance if we use some of the actor's techniques. Is this a contradiction? No, it isn't; as you can speak Italian without being an Italian citizen, you can use acting techniques without being an actor. Let's look at this from different angles.

**You may say
why struggle
with some kind
of perfection
when there are
much simpler means
of pleasing
the audience?
One can only answer
to that,
why have art?**

Mikhail Shchepkin,
1788 to 1863

In my opinion, the quote has been misunderstood and Robert-Houdin didn't mean it the way it was generally interpreted by his contemporaries and later his modern colleagues.

There is a long tradition of misinterpreted quotes in history and I have a small collection. By this I mean quotes that have been taken out of context and have then been used to prove a point of view often supporting exactly the opposite of what the creator of the quote intended.

To lead into this I will briefly comment on my favorite misquote—one which you all know, Juvenal's "*mens sana in corpore sano*," in English: "*a healthy mind in a healthy body*." It is often resorted to by so-called "motivational speakers" who want you to believe that you have to lead what they preach to be a "healthy life" in order to become happy, or reach your goals. Their main goal, it seems to me, is to sell their philosophy, their seminars, their books and DVDs (there's a similarity to some magic lectures ...).

Juvenal's complete quote in context is: "*Orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano*," and it means something like "*It would be nice if in those healthy bodies there was also a healthy mind*." Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis (ca. 60-127 AD), Anglicized as Juvenal, was a Roman satiric poet of the first century AD who used this phrase in his *Satires*, a collection of satirical poems, and it was meant to criticize the folly of Roman society during the reign of the emperor Domitian (60-140 AD), among other things the body building cult the Romans had developed at that time. So Juvenal meant the exact opposite of what so many people are using his quote to imply today: he wanted to say that people should better develop their intellectual capacities rather than wasting their time caring for their good looks. Well, this thought has never been more topical than today.

I found it amusing to note that Professor Hoffmann, in a footnote of his Robert-Houdin translation, wrote the following: "*The present chapter being a disquisition on the precise signification of a couple of French terms, will have but little interest for the ordinary English reader. It would, however, have been an unjustifiable mutilation of the text to have omitted it*." He couldn't know what a tremendous influence one specific sentence in this chapter would have on authors and performers for the next 150 years.

Unfortunately we cannot ask Robert-Houdin to comment on his famous and influential sentence, which has become one of the most quoted in the history of magic. Therefore let's start by putting the facts on the table and look at the exact context the phrase has been taken from; from then on we'll have to speculate intelligently.

The sentence occurs in the middle of a chapter which deals neither with the presentation nor the staging of magic, but ... etymology. Robert-Houdin discusses which term (in French, of course) would be most suitably used for a conjuror. He lists a few and especially chastises the (then) relatively new term "prestidigitateur," the Latin origin of which signifies "fast fingers," and being an artist at heart, he vehemently denies that a magician and his magic be reduced to just sleight-of-hand, or finger-flicking as we

would derogatorily say nowadays, and it is in this context that he writes the fateful sentence that of course a magician is not like a juggler, but rather an actor playing the role of a magician. Before we proceed, let me give you Professor Hoffmann's translation of the original French text:

ESCAMOTAGE, PRESTIDIGITATION.

Before we proceed to make practical use of the two words which head this chapter, it will be as well to get a clear understanding of their true meaning, and to do this, we must inquire into their derivation.

Escamotage (conjuring) comes from the Arab word escamote, signifying the little cork ball subsequently known as a muscade (nutmeg), from a fancied resemblance to that fruit. Originally, the term escamotage was applied solely to cup-and-ball conjuring, but it was subsequently used as a comprehensive term to describe the performance of conjuring tricks generally.

The word prestidigitation dates from a later period. In 1815, Jules de Rovère, who had previously denominated himself a physicien, as was then the practice of all conjurors of the first rank, invented for his own use the term prestidigitateur, formed from two Latin words, presto digite, meaning nimble fingers [The word is really of mixed origin, digitus (a finger), being Latin, presto (quick), Italian—RG]. The word has been adopted as a part of our language, and now it would be deemed a slight upon a performer of any mark not to give him this high-sounding title.

Neither one of these denominations, however, authorized though they are by long use, is in my opinion fully adequate to describe the art of fictitious magic.

Escamotage will always recall to the mind the "cup-and-ball" tricks whence it derives its origin, and referring specially, as it does, to one particular feat of dexterity, suggests but an imperfect idea of the wide range of the wonder-exciting performances of a magician.

Prestidigitation seems to imply, from its etymology, that it is necessary to have nimble fingers in order to produce the illusions of magic, which is by no means strictly true.

A conjuror is not a juggler; he is an actor playing the part of a magician; he is an artist whose fingers have more need to move with deftness than with speed. I may even add that where sleight-of-hand is involved, the quieter the movement of the performer, the more readily will the spectators be deceived. [Emphasis added—RG]

The conjuror claims to possess supernatural powers; he holds in his hand a wand the might of which nothing can resist. Why then should he need, in order to work his wonders, to exaggerate the quickness of his movements? Such a mode of proceeding is illogical and inconsistent. In view of gestures of unusual rapidity, the spectators will generally be bewildered, puzzled, but not convinced, while, on the other hand, an easy, quiet manner will always induce confidence, and so promote illusion.

The word prestidigitation, therefore, only imperfectly describes the art which it denotes.

Instead of creating new names, would it not have been better for the adepts of White Magic to have retained the

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term, at once appropriate and exhaustive, which we find in Plautus, and in many dictionaries, both ancient and modern—*prestigiator* (Lat: *prestigiator*), worker of wonders (*prestiges*). Nevertheless, in order not to run counter to our readers' preconceived notions, we shall make use indifferently of the two terms generally adopted to designate the art of deception, *Escamotage* and *Prestidigitation* [Hoffman notes: *The present chapter being a disquisition on the precise signification of a couple of French terms, will have but little interest for the ordinary English reader. It would, however, have been an unjustifiable mutilation of the text to have omitted it*].

The vast majority of conjuring tricks are variations of the same broad idea—viz., to cause the disappearance of a given object, and to make it reappear in a different place to that in which it has ostensibly been placed. The details may vary, but the principle is the same. There are certain articles of frequent use in conjuring, which have necessitated the composition of appropriate methods and processes for their production, disappearance, or transformation. Such are, for example, coins, cards, large and small balls, corks, pocket-handkerchiefs, &c.

The description of these methods will precede that of the tricks in which the articles I have referred to are employed.

We will commence with the methods especially appropriate to coins.

There you are—I'll let you draw your own conclusions. What follows are some considerations of mine ... further opinions, if you will.

One of my favorite essays on the theory of magic is "The Vernon Touch," published as an introduction to what I consider one of the most important magic books, namely Lewis Ganson's *The Dai Vernon Book of Magic*. There, on p.27, Dai Vernon talks about naturalness and says:

"A lot of people might have difficulty in understanding exactly what I mean by being natural. It's very important that movements made when a secret sleight is accomplished are natural movements, but being natural also means being yourself. If you work in a conversational style, you work as you feel, you do not try to ape somebody else, unless you are playing a part."

Reread the last sentence: "... you do not try to ape somebody else, unless you are playing a part."

Acting is essentially about playing a part and that's what magic is not about, at least as a general rule (though there are exceptions). Most of us, especially those performing in close-up situations, as compared to parlor or stage, are at least trying to be themselves, or the best of

themselves, and are not playing a part. Actually playing a part, as an actor does, is in my opinion detrimental to good magic.

In the history of magic there have been and still are performers who *do play a part*, a theatrically clearly defined role, such as Cardini playing a tipsy gentleman, Di Sato a Mephistophelean magician, or Ali Bongo the Shriek of Araby. In these cases a character is defined through costume, special make-up, specific gestures and poses, situations, music, and more. In this essay I will essentially not be concerned with this type of magic as it very obviously is an example of a situation in which a performer acts the part of a magician whose role he has clearly but artificially defined. Here the magician clearly is an actor playing whatever role he has created for himself. I will be concerned with the performer who essentially wants to be himself, and that's most of the magicians I know, including myself.

I believe that the art of the actor and that of the magician are different. The actor is an instrument, albeit an artistic one, of the play and its director. Essentially the actor is a figure within a play that theatrically interprets a story as it could occur in real life, with its plot, conflicts, and final resolution. This can be played from comedic to tragic and everything between. The actor interprets a text written by the author of the play and it is his job to creatively inhabit this to emotionally and intellectually involve the audience and make them "live" the story. It is hoped that the audience thus gains a dissociated view and experience of a situation he or his fellow men could be in and thus get a more mature understanding of life and people.

Magic, however, is different, although structurally similar and will occasionally use the same platform of the theater. The purpose of magic is to take man's world of dreams, desires, and fantasies as the subject and show how it can be lived by a super-hero, a God on earth, who is the magician, the maker of wonders. The beauty and wisdom harbored by the mysterious, and the feeling of astonishment and wonder created by the magician's performance, liberates the spectator from the constraints of his limited intellect and leads him, to use a metaphor favored by Juan Tamariz, over the rainbow, through Alice's mirror into Wonderland, where everything is possible. This is different from theater, literature, or film. And even the science-fiction genre when seen in those arts won't have the realistic feeling a magician's performance has, where the audience, at least for a moment, really believes that the lady is floating, whereas *the same effect in another medium does not cause the same emotion*.

Furthermore the "natural" magician is the direct source of his art, unlike the actor who is an "instrument" of the play and its author. The magician is more like

**I realized that
I had said a few
words in a perfectly
simple manner,
so simple
that had I said
them in life
and not in a play
I would not
have said them
otherwise.**

Stanislavski,
*Stanislavski an Introduction—
The System*

Such genuine innocence was a key to his success. (...) Unlike their experiences with his magician peers, who were frequently attempting to emulate someone much older and more sophisticated, audiences never got the feeling Doug [Henning] was acting. In fact, he wasn't.

John Harrison, *Spellbound*

a painter, who expresses himself through his hands and his instrument, the hands becoming the extension of his mind, to paraphrase the German philosopher Karl Jaspers. But unlike a painter, the magician communicates at the moment his art is performed. Ideally, and in an artistic sense, magic is about the performer himself, his beliefs and criteria, his taste and choices, his inner world, not that of a role imposed upon him by an author as is the case with a theatrical actor. Furthermore, acting is about "presentation," but as Tamariz points out in his lectures, presentation is *not* the most important thing in magic, however, personality and the (choice of) effect are—to this I would add the performer's originality, which is a combination of his personality and his interpretation of the effect, as well as the flawless (technical) execution. The latter also comes before the presentation, because if the audience suspects, let alone detects, what the performer is doing, no presentation in the world will cause wonderment.

I sincerely think that *in order to do good (close-up) magic you do not need to be an actor*. This is good news, I hope, because *most of us are not actors*. And even if we try, because we know the concept and even if we have taken a few acting classes, it will not make us actors. In the same way that it won't make us chefs just because we have eaten in some good restaurants and read a few cook books. Cooking and acting are professions, and you don't become a professional just like that. A partial proof is the fact that an actor is not automatically a magician. Although an actor as well as a magician may stand on the same stage, their professions are even more different than playing the piano and walking on a tightrope. Both take talent, dedication, and skill, but they are not the same thing.

An example where acting is detrimental to a situation, as Juan Tamariz once pointed out to me, is in most kinds of sucker effects. Acting out the situation with a text and gestures as it would be done in a play won't pass as sincere, whereas if you simply keep quiet and don't say anything it is much more likely to be believed.

My personal opinion is this: I don't believe that going to acting classes or joining an acting group will be of great help in becoming a better magician, because you will be doing many things that have nothing to do with magic, some of them will even be unfavorable for magic.

On the other hand I do recommend taking *private lessons* from an actor, speaker, or director. I took lessons from all three for years by studying *specific* magic tricks from my repertoire I already did well (or thought so). Here the actor's, speaker's, and director's know-how will directly be applied to *your way of performing* a magic trick. Still,

be aware that as much as these people know about the *dramatic construction* and interpretation of a trick, they haven't got a clue of the *psychological construction* used in magic, although in their specialty there is also such a thing (as there is in a movie or in a novel).

I have seen several professional magicians who have obviously relied solely on the work and advice of a theatrical director and failed to have a magical consultant as well (or have this knowledge themselves). For instance, I saw an otherwise excellent act attach a prediction envelope to the back curtain of a small theater with a clip. Obviously, when the prediction was later taken from the curtain and its content shown, several intelligent spectators thought that an assistant behind the curtain had introduced the prediction through a slit in the curtain into the envelope (unfortunately that was the method). To attach a prediction envelope to the curtain, theatrically speaking, makes sense if this was just a play. But in a magic performance, the point is to astonish the audience in order to create wonderment. If there is anything in the process that gives a solution to how the final effect is achieved, this wonderment won't occur and the piece has lost its *raison d'être*. It would have been much better had they, for instance, used Buckley's original method with a chair on the side of the stage which is imperceptibly loaded by an assistant. Then the chair is brought to the middle of the stage to allow a person to reach for an envelope that is hanging from the ceiling, affecting the loading at that moment. Just breaking the linear association of cause and effect will suffice to protect the secret from the most astute spectator (although I agree with Dai Vernon that there is no trick which isn't at least occasionally seen through by somebody—but that's a topic for another column). Obviously the director thought this is more complicated, time consuming, and less aesthetic, which in a certain sense is correct, and assumed he could improve the staging by simply having the envelope clipped to the back curtain. This, however, robbed the trick of its real beauty which only comes out when there is wonderment. It is very hard for directors in theater and TV to understand that.

To close I will say that, in my opinion, Robert-Houdin never meant his words as an encouragement to put acting into one's magic. I have instinctively stayed away from any type of acting, and so have many colleagues I know who have become world-class magicians. It is much better to practice magic intelligently *a lot*, read, discuss, think to better understand magic in all its aspects—this can make somebody a good magician if there is also perseverance, talent, and inspiration. •