

February 20~How Did You Do That?

Of all the questions a magician gets asked over a lifetime, the most frequent must be: “How did you do that?” Fortunately very few expect the performer to respond. Asking the question is simply another way of expressing one’s surprise and astonishment; it is rhetorical. When an answer *is* expected, our two old friends can get us out of trouble quickly. (1) “Very well, thank you.” (2) “I’ve practiced for many years.”

The first, albeit hackneyed, responds to the person’s genuine curiosity in a humorous way, signaling that the questioner cannot expect a serious answer. The second meets the question on the same level it was posed, with a straight and honest, though simplistic, answer.

In discussing the matter with my friend and grand master, Juan Tamariz, he suggested this approach, to be used only when the inquirer shows a deeper than usual interest: “When you watch a magic performance, there are two possibilities for you as a spectator. Either you are astonished and enjoy the emotion and insight this brings, or you try to discover how it is done. If you try to discover the secret, there are, again, two possibilities. Either you succeed, and will be disillusioned, which causes disappointment and frustration. Or you fail, which causes similar feelings. In either circumstance, when you try to discover how magic works after a performance, you will end up disappointed and frustrated. It is therefore always better just to drop your mental defenses and enjoy the emotion and the insight astonishment brings.”

This is a very intelligent answer. I also regularly use a short anecdote attributed to Picasso. At one of his early exhibitions, a journalist asked whether he thought his audience would understand his art. Picasso answered, “Do you hear that bird singing outside the window?” “Yes, why?” “Do you like the way he sings?” “I certainly do.” “Do you understand what he’s saying?” That’s a nice metaphor, and it shows that, especially in the arts, but also in life, it’s often enough to like something, without understanding it.

I also use Einstein’s quote: “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” Magic, like other arts, offers an aesthetic experience. There is great beauty in having experienced wonder, especially if it happens in the safe context of a performance. Magic stimulates our imagination and does more for us than we can explain.