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TopHat

January 2006...

...46th edition

By Jon Snoops



Welcome, both to a brand new year and the 46th edition of TopHat. And I have to say: it's a good one. What a way to kick off the year? Here's what we have this month...

To start off with, Darmoe continues his latest series for mentalists, Real Mentalism. Over the years, Craig has contributed greatly to the ezine, representing the mentalism/bizarre branch and this series continues with more of his thoughts. Following this, Tam McLaughlin begins a series which details on the steps he took to forming, from ground up, a complete cabaret act. This is great reading for anyone looking to develop their act and follows on nicely as an applied example of Michael L's last series on routining. In this first part, Tam talks about what he hoped to gain from this experience as well as how he chose the effects to perform and how they fit together.

Peter Marucci then breaks things up a bit with a simple card trick, greatly enhanced by some imaginative patter. In Michael L's new series, Michael begins discussing different PA systems that magicians might find useful when needing to be heard. I know that to some people this will be invaluable advice from someone who obviously knows his stuff... Michael quite rightly points out that this kind of information won't be found in Tarbell or Mark Wilson's. When he's done after the next few months, I'm pretty sure that this will end up as a definitive guide on the subject.

The final article of this month's issue is another one from Gary Scott. Here, he discusses how you can create a performance character for yourself. He begins by talking about the creation of his own alter-ego, Alucard Van Horn, then goes on to discuss what you might think about when creating *your* character. Even if you aren't looking to invent some wonderfully wacky character, you'll find this article both interesting and useful in developing your individual performing persona.

I'm also pleased to announce the semi-return of the Chatter on Patter supplement. Despite being reduced to what might be referred to as a barebones format, I know that many will be pleased to hear of its return. My thanks to Will for agreeing to continue this until we finish TopHat in May. Look out for some more great material in future editions of the supplement.

Well, on behalf of everybody at MagicBunny.co.uk, I hope you had a great Christmas and New Year. Who knows what this year might have in store for us?!

Enjoy the ezine...

All the best,
Jon

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Real Mentalism Part II

Real Mentalism...

...Part II

By P. Craig Browning



Today there is a very strong tendency within magic, to neuter the psychological advantages once known to the mentalist. As I and others have pointed out in recent articles, books, lectures, etc. this "trend" seems to stem from two chief sources; the skeptics allied with magic, and the magicians who are afraid of making a total commitment to presenting mentalism properly; preferring instead, to cling to their older habits and corn-ball attitudes that work with magic, but not mentalism. There are other less pronounced and kindred sources for what we are seeing, but most fall under one of these two headings, which ironically, seem to overlap in and of their own.

When it comes to the psychological principles allied with *genuine* Mentalism vs. how we present Magic the differences being akin to oil & water. Sadly, this is something many, whether it's due to lethargy or denial, do not want to recognize and as an end result, brings about long term damage – loss – to our craft. A craft that has known many incarnations in the past century or so, the majority of which tend to include those same growing pains we see today – the on-going debates as to what is what, which is "better", etc.

As to this latter issue, which is "better" the truth of the matter is, you will find good and bad in either field. Sadly, it's much easier in today's world to find poor mentalism than we find poor magic, but that's primarily due to the influx of egos that simply don't want to listen to those that have been doing such presentations longer, in a more diverse arena than what the new comer's want to envision. In the mind of many, mentalism is the vehicle for getting on TV and hitting the headlines and I can assure you, **it's not!** It's time has come and gone and if you weren't on the train when it left the station (prior to the turn of the century – 20th into the 21st) you've probably missed out on where it's heading.

This is simply how the cycles of public interest and show biz work; just like computer technology, the instant it becomes a matter of public knowledge and available even at the limited consumer level (such as Comdex) it's already obsolete. In show business or any product/service industry, it's the people that can see the new trends or better yet, create the new trends, that wins; everything else is simply a copy and rarely seen as being much more than that. Needless to say, the copies rarely gain the advantages known to the original (so long as the original can keep up with the demand.)

When it comes to Mentalism however, the **fear** many magicians have towards it is the one thing very few ever wish to discuss. It has been a running joke for decades in fact; that the reason magician's fail so miserably in delivering effective mentalism is that it scares them too much because when it is done correctly, it becomes very real; Especially when you move into some of the more 'advanced' techniques that up until

Real Mentalism Part II (cont.)

recent times have been kept under hat for the most part.

Muscle Reading/Hellstromism is a prime example of one technique that has resulted in many a magician running back to the comfort of their *Hippity Hop Rabbits* and a crisp deck of cards. In short, it's too real for some and scares the hell out of them. Especially those that have a natural penchant for doing this kind of demonstration and they find themselves accomplishing non-contact demonstrations that are uncannily accurate and "easy to do". Combine this skill with some of the more advanced principles, such as are shared by Millard Longman in his *"Psychic Skills Workshop"* or even some of the thoughts shared by members of S.C.H.O.O.L. (Wonder Wizards/ Kenton Knepper & Co.) and you find yourself treading on ground once seen as "forbidden". Not just from the religious/spiritual point of view but from the realm of stage magic as well. After all, we're talking about Magick vs. Magic – we're looking at going beyond basic physical or even psychological trickery and quite literally cultivating the ability to walk into the mind of others [insert Twilight Zone music here]. This brings us to the area I refer to as being "genuine" mentalism – that aspect of the craft that's known exceptional longevity and yet, seems to be seen as the black-sheep element allied to the magical arts.

Why?

Because it holds closest to the actual roots and traditions associated with this amazing art form; something that serves as a bit of an irritant to those holding to the skeptic/cynic's attitude and magician alike. After all, there are certain elements of advantage those holding to these older traditions host over those that pursue their role as a "Mentalist" along the more traditional commercial lines taken by the typical entertainer.

I'm not stating that those who approach their role as a Mentalist just as they would a magic career are wrong or worse than those that hold to the older traditions; that's simply not true! What is true however is that this route of course is much more challenging and offers far more competition than the former; you end up working twice as hard to make even half as much money in many instances. The exceptions of course, are those pushing the Public Speaking and Corporate envelope as being their market of preference. But income potential is something we need to take a look at briefly.

Regardless of which route you take in marketing yourself, the income potential centers 100% on YOU not the mode by which you are performing, the market you're in, or current trends. Granted, trends can affect the roller-coaster ride every business will see, but it still comes to you, your ability to be consistent and yet flexible enough to work with current public demand, and most importantly, your ability and willingness to invest your entire self into meeting your goals that makes the difference. I can make just as much money working along the older, more traditional route as someone taking on the corporate/commercial angle; I just go about it differently. Either route of action can easily deliver to you a steady above average income; either can quite literally make you a multimillionaire. The question must be, **how hard are you willing to work and what are you willing to sacrifice in order to get there?**

The older way of practice allows me to stay closer to home; there is less travel, less competition, far fewer headaches and the opportunity to actually live a somewhat normal life i.e. home, family, pets, being part of a community, etc. The more commercial route entails six to nine months a year on the road e.g. little to no time for family and having a "home life". You will also average about 3-4 hours sleep a day at least six days a week when you're on the road and of course, you are working on those days most people have off. Too, even if you have an agent/manager, you still have to hustle on a daily basis, to get that next gig; hoping and praying you won't get sick or have any kind of unforeseen set-back as you fill up your schedule for the next 18-24 months... of course, if you do get sick or injured you'd best make certain you're on your death bed before cancelling a date because that client/agent, etc. probably will not reschedule you and if you do this too often, others will get cold feet when it comes to dealing with you as well. Of course, this goes with most any type of employment but most especially for we that don the cloak of being entertainers; the world simply isn't all that forgiving and their ability to remember you is exceptionally short.

I recall a conversation with Franz Harary some years ago; he was beat as the result of his schedule and I simply asked why he doesn't take a couple of weeks off and go on vacation. He pointed out that he did that once and in taking a simple 30-day break from his normal routine, ended up having to work ten times harder to re-establish relationships and get back into the good graces of agents, etc. In other words, he learned that you can't say "NO" to work, nor can you sit back and take time off... there is literally something that must be done 24/7/365 if you are going to be successful as a commercial performer whether you're an established act simply trying to hold on to your status and position in the ranks, or someone moving up the ladder and into the limelight.

Real Mentalism Part II (cont.)

I've worked this kind of schedule and ended up physically, mentally and emotionally ill as the end result. In that I'm not the world's greatest business manager (I have the horrid belief that money exists for spending... never did good in math, if you know what I mean), I am an "artist" – a creative mind with a strong sense of resource. It is not unusual for those that fit this particular niche to "fail" in our industry simply because we're easily distracted and thus, loose momentum when it comes to focusing and following through on things (one of the reasons I have so many unfinished book projects sitting on the shelf, I guess...) My point being, not all of us are cut out for taking the commercial course. Many of us only aspire to do "our thing" at the level of personal amusement and not anything remotely close to a professional level of ambition. There are likewise those "dreamers" amongst us, that want to go pro but it is not in their nature to approach the business in the manner generally required... as the old saying goes, it's survival of the fittest – a very dog eat dog environment in which the strong and merciless win and all too many of the "nice guys" seemingly finish last. This however brings us to a final point in this issue...

We are each INDIVIDUALS and as such, what works for one person will not necessarily work for the next. How we approach our work, the areas and styles that will work best for us, all depend upon our natural sense of character, our comfort zone and manner of "being".

There's a 101 "Gorilla Marketing" styled books out there right now that give you a hustler's approach to sales and marketing when it comes to magic. Personally, I detest the greater majority of what's shared in these resources in that it takes on the classic testosterone filled "jock" attitude of push, push, push, in your face sales. I personally loathe this kind of sales tactic, will not put up with a sales person that uses it and feel it is rather insulting e.g. I WILL NOT use such an approach – I treat people the way I want to be treated, it's that simple! It's also one of the most important rules of thumb, at least in my experience as both, an entertainer and a salesman, to be remembered and applied in all we do.

I'll catch you next month!

By P. Craig Browning

Developing a Cabaret Act Part I

Developing a Cabaret Act...

...Part I: Introduction and Routine

By Tam McLaughlin

A LITTLE BACKGROUND



Introduction

Many of the experienced and professional magicians have freely offered their advice on various topics from building a routine to presenting yourself in a professional manner. The most important thing I took from this advice was that in order to put together a magical and professional performance, I would have to invest a great deal of time and effort thinking about every aspect of the performance and not just the mechanics of each trick.

As there have been several threads in Magic Bunny along the lines of:

- Q:** I have never done cabaret magic but I have a show in four weeks, what should I do?
A: Don't do the show! Four weeks is not enough time to prepare.

I wanted to share my experience of the work involved in putting together my first show. My experience is certainly not how you should prepare for an act. In fact, my experience will show you some of the mistakes and pitfalls that I came across. I write this essay in the hope that it might help some new magicians understand the work and time that is involved in building an act, and hopefully help prepare them for when they are ready to build their own act.

Developing a Cabaret Act Part I (cont.)

The Story Begins Here

My wife, Clare and myself recently celebrated our 10th wedding anniversary in September 2005, but first, let me take you back a few months to May 2005.

Clare and I were discussing plans for our forthcoming wedding anniversary that was going to be held in the church hall where we originally had our wedding reception. I had a fantastic idea of doing a short 5 minute magic act and set about creating a list of all the cabaret/stand up effects that I had. Clare suggested that I "sit back down, calm down and don't get so excited. The party is 4 months away". I said "The professionals start planning well in advance and I want to make my show look as professional as I can so I **must** start planning immediately. Clare, this is important to us!" Clare gave one of those looks that said "Aye, important to you" while actually saying "Ok, if it keeps you quiet for a while". In actual fact, I was thinking to myself that I could have something sorted in a month but was so excited that I wanted to start work on the act immediately. Little did I know how much work lay ahead of me?

My Goals

As a magic hobbyist who has been mainly interested in card and close up magic for several years and more recently children's magic, I had no experience of cabaret magic. I thought that my anniversary party would be an ideal opportunity to perform cabaret style magic in front of an audience of around 80 people.

My goals were as follows:

- Prove to myself that I could create a professional like performance.
- Prove to myself that I could entertain with confidence
- Most importantly, entertain our guests

CHOOSING THE ACT

Over the next few weeks, my act had progressed from 10 minutes to 45 minutes as I included all the effects that I owned and ones that I was going to buy - this show was going to be great!

I was desperate to purchase the comedy linking rings known as Quadro Vicious Circle but at £99 Clare persuaded me that it was too expensive for something I may only do once. I tried to explain that being the magician I had a good idea of what would go down well and explained how sometimes you had to spend a lot of money for a good prop.

Of course after a few days thinking about it, I realised Clare was right. I didn't need to spend a lot of money on a new prop when I already had some good effects. She's usually right. Why don't I listen to her more often?

I started to think about how I could link the 15 or so tricks that I had into a routine. The tricks were so good that I had to use them all – everyone would love this show; I had a good card trick, a good mentalist routine, and swallowing those razor blades would fit in nicely!

I sat down one night with a large glass of Shiraz and decided to slow down and take my show more seriously. If I was trying to portray a more professional image, then I had to take the advice on board from Magic Bunny that I had picked up along the way. I decided to limit the number of effects and perform these well in a proper routine with good presentation rather than make it look as if I am trying to rush through as many tricks as possible. Leave them wanting more as the saying goes.

So, I went through all the effects that I had listed including the ones I would like to buy and had a serious think about which ones would be practical, not too difficult to learn and would flow well together. I started to think differently about what I was doing. I started to think backwards: I looked at how I wanted to come across with the audience and then selected effects that would suit those criteria.

During this time, I had been reading "Showmanship for magicians" but found that it is difficult to digest the material in the book and work on an act at the same time. This is a great book but I wouldn't recommend it for non-magicians, especially magicians' wives. For some reason, when I read out certain passages from the

Developing a Cabaret Act Part I (cont.)

book to Clare e.g. how to walk onto a stage properly, she didn't seem to share the same passion as myself. This should have been obvious after the first week of replies such as "Oh really"; "right" and "Hmm, what do you want for dinner tomorrow?"

I soon realised how big a task I was taking on. At the beginning of my adventure, I was sure all I had to do was get a few tricks together and now I was thinking about my posture while presenting an effect and how to guide volunteers to the stage area.

THE TRICKS

I had narrowed the list of effects down to several that I already had and a few that I would like to buy and perform for the act. At this stage, the following effects were ones which I wanted to include:

- Knife Through Jacket. I have always been interested in this classic. I thought it would be ideal as it had plenty of room for developing my own presentation and would allow some audience participation.
- Bill in lemon, which I had no idea how to do.
- I had recently purchased the Paul Daniel's Live in Edinburgh DVD and was inspired to include a routine based on the Electric Chair effect.

It was now time to spend some money on these effects so I purchased the following manuscripts:

- Knife Through Coat: Bob Read
- Ultimate Bill in Lemon by Robert Olson
- Buzzed by Ricki Dunn

However, that was not the end of my spending. I found that, with the exception of Buzzed, the routines in the manuscripts did not suit exactly what I wanted to do as I will explain below while discussing the effects.

Knife through Jacket

Bob Read's manuscript was excellent but I felt his routine was built around his personality with bits of business that would be difficult for anyone else to pull off. In fact, I borrowed an old video of Bob performing this routine, which although excellent, was not my style as he told a lot of jokes and I am not a comedian. The search for a Knife Through Jacket routine that suited my style went on. My search came to an end when I purchased the Wayne Dobson DVD: "Dobson's Choice: TV Stuff Volume 1", which included his own Knife Through Jacket routine. Wayne Dobson's routine is direct and easy to follow. He uses two spectators to hold the jacket which would give me the chance to involve more audience members. All I had to do was adapt the routine to my on style.

Bill in Lemon

The manuscript was very good but I wanted the note signed so again, this routine not suit me. I looked at different versions of this classic including the routine in the Mark Wilson book but could not find anything that suited until I bought Carl Cloutier Bill in Kiwi DVD. This routine involved a note vanishing with the spectator given a kiwi as compensation. Sometime later, the kiwi is returned and sliced open to reveal the signed note.

Electric Chairs

I had read on Magic Bunny that this effect should not be done unless you have a great deal of experience dealing with audiences. Although I trusted this advice to some extent, I had just joined Magic Bunny so had no idea who these strange people were giving out advice and wanted to look into this effect for myself. Now that I have been a member of MB for several months, I would trust their advice so much more, but some of them are still strange J Good advice is always available on MB by people who have the experience to back it up. It is up to you whether you take that advice or not but it is important to understand why that advice has been given and decide if it will be of benefit to you and act upon it rather than ignore the advice simply because you don't like it.

Ok, getting back to the Electric Chairs. It is difficult to describe my thoughts on this effect without revealing any of the secrets used to carry out this effect or at least how I would perform this effect. If you don't know the effect, essentially, a spectator comes up to help you with a routine, takes a seat and a few moments

Developing a Cabaret Act *Part I (cont.)*

later, suddenly jumps from his seat as if he has just got an electric shock from the seat. There are several ways to achieve this effect but my belief is that you need to pick the right person and build up a rapport with them in order to pull this off.

I thought that as I already knew my audience, I would be able to find the right person. I studied the manuscript and studied Paul Daniel's performance until I understood how to perform this effect and why it works.

Sadly, after a lot of work, I decided to drop this effect for the following reasons:

1. I could not think how to construct my own shorter routine to fit in with the other effects
2. I had watched Paul Daniel's performance so much that I was in danger of copying him
3. Lack of time to rehearse
4. I thought it would be better to stick to something less ambitious for my first performance.

Splash Bottle

I was looking for a quick opener to grab the audience attention and after taking advice from Lee Alex and JM Magic, I decided to use Splash Bottle. Splash Bottle is a production effect where you blow up a balloon, burst it and reveal a bottle of bubbly. However, I didn't like the idea of producing something without a reason so needed to think of a humorous reason for the production.

As it happens, there was some friendly email banter between myself and a dozen or so friends who would be attending the party about whether it was Bring Your Own Bottle (BYOB) or if there would be a free bar. Of course there was going to be a bar – I couldn't celebrate 10 years of marriage without a drink - but the bar certainly was not going to be free! If it was, with the way my friends drink, it would soon turn into a divorce party.

This banter gave me the idea to produce the bottle to music and then finish with delivering the following line with a confused look and tone: "Well I thought it was BYOB".

Knickerbocker

I decided to include this routine which is a light hearted mentalist effect based upon divining the colour of a number of volunteers underwear. This was ideal to get more audience participation with plenty of room for some fun. The routine is by James Bliss and described in his book "Messing With Minds" and can also be found on the excellent [Online Visions](#) web which I suggest you read to get an idea of the effect as I will not be detailing it in this essay.

Basically, the routine would use four volunteers from the audience who would join me on stage and write down the colour of their underwear on a sheet of A4 card. The cards would be mixed up and I would be able to determine which card/colour belonged to which person. With the last colour, I would read the volunteers mind to determine the colour and what I had written down would match the last card.

Grave Mistake

This is one trick that I purchased (by Dick Stoner) that would fit the theme of the night.

The presentation is based around planning your own funeral while showing the audience a large sheet of paper of a fancy coffin with drapes and embossed casket. I say how my wife thinks it is too expensive while folding the sheet to reveal a simpler, cheaper coffin. This happens a few times until I say how my wife finds the perfect coffin for me and on the final fold I reveal a dustbin. It would be quite easy to develop the patter for this effect considering the occasion. I also have permission from Dick Stoner to describe the effect and reproduce my patter, which borrows heavily on the original.

Appearing Straw

I picked up this trick from EBay and thought I could include this with some patter about missing the buffet and having to order in a McDonalds but as usual they get my order wrong, forget the drink but give me a large straw.

Developing a Cabaret Act Part I (cont.)

BUILDING THE ROUTINE

The final list of effects was:

Effect
Splash Bottle
Appearing straw
Grave mistake
Bill in kiwi
KTJ
Paper ball over head
Knickerbocker
Bill in Kiwi (finale)

I had worked out that above effects should last about 30 minutes.

But what makes a routine out of the above effects?

My thoughts are that the effects should flow together in a logical progression without seeming disjointed as if I am saying "and for my next trick". The book, Showmanship for Magicians talked about building peeks of excitement within each routine but I found this difficult to put into practice in the limited time that I had to prepare. Some people may say that I should have taken longer to prepare but Clare was not keen on changing the date of our anniversary J

I wanted to keep things simple. After all, I was not even sure I had the confidence to walk into stage in front of 80 people.

I wanted to start with a bang to get people interested right away and end with a strong finish. I decided that the middle of my routine should include some audience participation and some light hearted, humorous moments to allow the audience to relax in between the effects where they would have to think a little bit.

I had been taking notes during the entire time and decided to formalise my notes with various tables and diagrams describing the flow and progress of the routines.

The chart on the following page explains how I saw the effects fitting together in a final routine and with appropriate patter; the effects now had logical flow i.e. a routine.

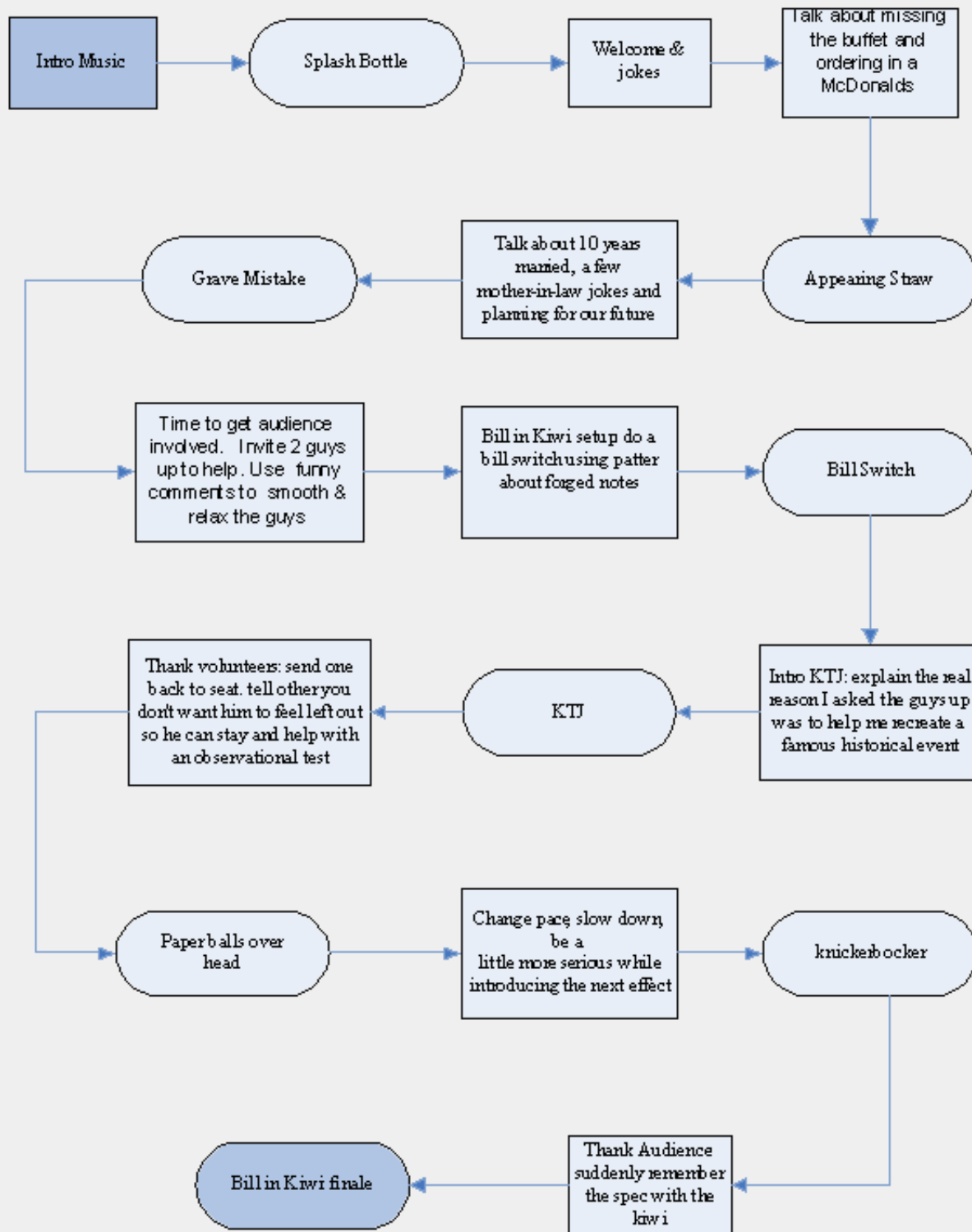
Next month, we'll look at how rehearsals helped iron out this routine and many other important aspects that had to be taken into consideration.

See you then!

By Tam McLaughlin

Developing a Cabaret Act Part I (cont.)

APPENDIX A



The Time Traveller

The Time Traveller...

...back in time for tea

By Peter Marucci



EFFECT:

One card is face up in a face-down deck. The card is removed and the deck turned face up. The card is returned to the deck anywhere and, when it is turned face down again and spread, the card has again turned face up.

WORKING:

A double-faced card (same on both sides) in the middle of a regular deck.

PRESENTATION:

"Time travel is one of the great dreams of mankind. And yet we all have our own time-travel machines: The ones that take up back are called 'memories'; the ones that take us

forward are called 'dreams'."

"But there is another kind of time machine and we can take a look at it right now."

The magus takes out a deck of cards and ribbon-spreads it face down; one card is face up in the middle (say, the 6D).

"A deck of cards and one of the cards is face up."

"This is 'now'."

"If we remove that card (the magus slides it out, still face up) and turn the deck face up (he does so), the 'now' has changed and the previous situation - a face-up card in the middle of the deck -- becomes 'then', while the arrangement we have in front of us is 'now'."

The magus turns the deck face up and ribbon spreads it.

"Once again, the 'now' has changed and the face-down deck has gone from 'now' to 'then'."

To a spectator: *"Please slide the six of diamonds into the face-up deck at any spot."*

When she does so, the magician squares the deck and turns it face down again.

"And yet again the 'now' has changed. We had a face-up card put into a face-up deck. Now the deck and the card are both face down."

"But, if we go back in time, to the original 'then' - (the magus ribbon spreads the face-down deck, revealing one card, the 6D, face up) - we once again have a face-down deck with one card - the original card - face up."

SECOND THOUGHTS:

A low, spot card - three, four, five or six - is probably best for this, since it is less confusing than a court card or a high spot card.

If you are using a red-backed deck, the card should be black; if you are using a blue-backed deck, the card should be red. This is simply for added contrast.

This is probably not strong enough to stand on its own but can be used effectively in the middle of a routine. Put the cards away immediately after doing the routine; the spectators WILL want to examine them. This is probably a good time for a deck switch.

Peter Marucci

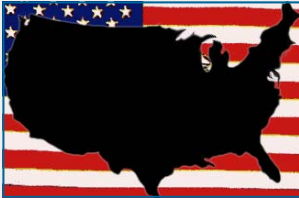
e-mail: showtimecol@aol.com

Thoughts From Mid-West America

Thoughts From Mid-West America...

...Being Heard

By Michael L.



So, you need some sound. On the one hand, that means you are getting big enough crowds that you are having trouble being heard and that is pretty sweet. On the other hand, you have to go buy a sound system and that kind of sucks. That's a lot of money to drop on something you probably don't even quite understand. Thumb through Wilson's *Complete Course* or the Tarbell volume of your choice and you won't find "A Magician's Guide to Sound Systems" anywhere. Wait, no scratch that... here it is, you're reading it!

Now, don't worry, we'll cover all the terms and tricks and such but first we need to examine what your needs are and what they might be in the near future. And you need to be honest about this or else you will end up with the wrong equipment and waste your money. You'll also need to read this article a couple of times before you set out to buy your PA system. There's a butt-load of information here and I figure it'll take at least 3 reads before you'll get a handle on everything.

QUESTION NUMBER ONE:

Do you need a battery powered rig? Please note that the question said *need* not *want*. I realize that, in general, we magician types love toys and gadgets and that having a fully portable sound system sounds kind of cool. But battery powered systems are expensive and often limited in their abilities. Unless you play outside a lot battery powered systems should not be considered.

QUESTION NUMBER TWO:

How much space do you need to cover? That may seem like a strange question... but the point of this article is covering the stuff you don't know about, ain't it? But seriously, you need to consider the size of the rooms you play because larger rooms may need not only more power but more speakers. Once you get to about 100, 150 seats you are probably going to need at least two speakers. By the time you hit the 300+ range you'll need four and if you get bigger than that then they had better have their own stinking sound system! Room size will help us figure out what range of output power we need to consider.

QUESTION NUMBER THREE:

How many microphones are you going to need? Unless you are a pantomime act, you will need a mike. Do you have any assistants with lines or will you need mikes for volunteers? Every mike is going to need its own channel... but more on that later.

QUESTION NUMBER FOUR:

Do you have any auxiliary sound devices? CD players, tape decks and MP3 players all might be used in your act for background music, prerecorded bits or to record your shows. These may use regular channels (like mikes) or a special set of connectors. If you already own these devices, you may want to note what style of connectors they are equipped with... and there will be more on that later, too.

QUESTION FIVE:

How much crap can you lug around? Remember, your sound system is going to have to be transported and set up in addition to your props. How much space do you have to spare in your ride? Systems, speakers in particular, can get *heavy*.

QUESTION SIX:

What is your sound plan? What sound do you need in your act and when? This is extremely important because most of y'all will end up being your own soundman. If things need to be switched or adjusted during the act *you* are going to have to take care it. Don't worry because this is possible but you'll need to plan ahead so you buy equipment that allows for it.

Thoughts From Mid-West America (cont.)

Before we go ahead and start going over what the answers to these questions mean to us, there are a few other things I'd like to touch on. The first is the importance of finding a good, reputable sound dealer. You need to ask around and find a real dealer, not just some online group. First of all, you don't know enough about this junk to buy online. Don't argue with me, you don't. Only people who know *exactly* what they need should shop online and you don't. You need to go out and listen to stuff before you buy. Also, a reputable dealer will almost always sell used equipment. Since sound equipment is something that musicians buy, out grow and then sell to finance their next purchase, there is a lot of quality used stuff out there, but you have to buy from someone trustworthy. Plus, your junk will break. Haul, set up, use, tear down, reload, haul, set up, use, tear down, reload, haul... get it? A lot of wear and tear, huh? And when it does go down you'll want to be able to take it in for a quick repair and maybe even get a loaner (since you probably can't afford a back up, can you?).

Finally, you'll need advice on everything from purchase to set up and the dealer is your best source. Even if you have to travel some to get there, a good dealer is invaluable.

Now that we have covered that let's talk about microphones. Mikes can cost anywhere from the price of a cheap DVD to the really nice car range. Why? Well, a mike can really make a huge difference in the way you sound. Also, recording requires every single component, especially the mikes, to be as hiss and hum free as possible. Lucky for us, though, none of that really makes a difference to us. We aren't recording and speaking requires a lot less dynamic response from the mike. Make sure that you buy mikes for speaking, not singing, and you'll save money. The big choice is wired or wireless.

Now there are plenty of people out there that will tell you that a magician simply can not work with a wired microphone. My question to them, then, is how did all those magicians manage it from the 1930's (when mikes became fairly common in large venues) until the mid 80's when wireless got popular? Sure, it is easier to deal with a wireless mike from a performance point of view... like Pinnocchio you got no strings on you. But from a sound point of view wireless mikes can be a nightmare. If you perform in nonstandard venues (and by this I mean school auditoriums, churches, community centers and such) you have no idea what kind of interference you will encounter, from hums and buzzing to picking up stray CB conversations. There is also a great deal more to go wrong with a wireless system. They cost a great deal more, too. All this needs to be weighed against the freedom of movement wireless systems offer.

Back to the questions. Question number one is pretty straight forward. If you must have a battery operated system then you are cutting down your choices considerably. Most systems will also not have very many channels, either, so if you must go battery then make sure you don't need very many mikes! A good rig will still allow an auxiliary sound device to be plugged in though, so don't worry about that.

Our second question was about space. I touched upon some guidelines before. If you only need two speakers or less, you may want to consider a combo unit, which is an amplifier with a built in speaker. Many, but not all of them, can handle having an extra speaker (called an extension speaker) added to them. If you think this is what you need then you will need to make sure the rigs you look at have some sort of extension speaker jack (and pay close attention to the impedance rating guidelines given in the manual). The kind of combo you are looking for is an acoustic amp. These are often multichannel, usually with one designed specifically for instruments and others for microphones or general use but the seldom have more than two or three channels and maybe an auxiliary input for CD players and such. I own a 60 Watt acoustic amplifier with two channels, CD input and ability to run an extension speaker or a line out to a house system and it is perfect for me.

A multi-speaker arrangement moves you into the realm of box mixers. These will generally be much more powerful than combos, but they start at around 100 Watts. In addition to being able to handle more speakers, box mixers have more channels than combo setups. Generally boxes run from 4 to 8 channels (plus extra inputs for CD players and such) although they run up to 12 channels.

Box mixers can have one, two or even three separate power amplifiers inside. Mono units have a single power amp, which means that every speaker attached to it is getting its signal from that amplifier. Because you are not trying to amplify a band, you actually have little use for creating stereo sound so a mono box is

Thoughts From Mid-West America (cont.)

an economical choice. A stereo mixer (two amps inside) generally runs the right hand speakers with one amplifier and the left hand speakers with the other. Some stereo setups assign one amp to the main speakers ('mains') and the other amp to 'monitors.' Monitors are speakers placed on stage that allow the band to hear themselves. This isn't exactly a need for magicians, so don't worry about it. The big difference is that a main/monitor arrangement allows for separate settings while sending everything to mains allows for only one control scheme. If your system allows you to select between the two options, send everything to the 'mains.' If not, simply set up the monitor controls exactly as you set up the main controls and use mains for one side, monitor for the other. Triple power amplifier arrangements allow for left and right dedicated amplifiers and a dedicated monitor amp. Generally speaking, this is way too much amplifier for your needs.

Some stereo amplifier allow you to 'mono-bridge' the two amplifiers into one, big amp creating a huge sound meant for one gigantic speaker column. This is something that you really shouldn't need, so don't pay any extra for this! All in all, though, the stereo setup is my suggestion. By using two amps to cover the crowd you put less stress on each of them. But if something does blow, it will usually be just in one amp and then you can limp along using the other side and finish the show.

We can take the next two questions together. You will need a channel for every microphone you use and an additional channel if you plan to use a CD or MP3 player for background music and the system you purchase does not have a special input for it. Microphone inputs come in two flavors: quarter inch and XLR (although there is a new trend toward using a 'combo jack' that takes quarter inch or XLR inputs). Quarter inch jacks are a larger version of your headphone speaker jack in appearance, although that headphone jack is stereo and your channel inputs should be mono. XLRs, sometimes referred to as balanced inputs, are circular connections about half an inch across with three wire connections built in. You can use either with any battery powered or unpowered mike, but if the mike needs to draw power from the system (this is called *phantom power*) you'll need XLR cable. If you are going to use mikes that require phantom power, make sure that your system not only provides phantom power to the mike jacks but that it provides the correct voltage because there really isn't a phantom power standard.

Even if you are using wireless mikes the receiver unit will need to plug into your PA system, so you will still need one channel for every mike. Off the top of my head I can't think of ever dealing with wireless units that had anything but quarter inch connections. Your specialized CD/MP3 player jacks will either be RCA jacks, which are simply the audio connections from the three wired red, yellow and white connector that came with your DVD player, or quarter inch jacks. On some newer systems these are marked "CD In" but many units still go with the traditional "Tape In" label. Usually if they are quarter inch jacks they are labeled "Aux In," but I can't tell you why! Whether they are Tape In, CD In, quarter inch or RCA these jacks almost always go directly into the power amplifiers, bypassing all controls. The only volume control you will have will be on the device you are plugging into the system. If you must control the device volume with your system then you will need to get a connector made to take the stereo signal out of the device (use the "line out" jack or the headphone jack, whichever it has, whether you are using RCA jacks or quarter inch or XLR to go into your system) and combine the two sides into a mono signal for the channel. One of the little idiosyncrasies I like about my amp is that it actually has a CD In Level control pot (a pot, short for potentiometer, is the fancy electronic term for what you probably just call a knob... but really the knob is the plastic bit pushed on the shaft of the pot).

This is probably a good time to go over connectors and wires and such. I know, your head is probably already swimming with XLRs and RCAs and so forth. Here is a quick break down of terms and tips. Stereo refers to things that carry a right and left signal while mono (short for monaural) carries only one signal and sometimes you may need a summing connector that turns a stereo signal into a mono one or a splitting connector that divides a mono signal into equal right and left signals for stereo. XLR, quarter inch, RCA, Speak-On, mini and micro all refer to styles of jacks. Connectors often have one type of connector on one end and something else on the other. Because XLRs and Speak-Ons can actually be wired several different ways, always consult your manuals for the proper wiring, although many items have the needed wiring printed with the jack (by the way, jacks are connection points and the end of wires are jacks as are the holes on the system or speaker that they plug into... they are divided into male and female and I will let you figure those out for yourself). I know, that sounds even *more* intimidating. Well, that's where that reputable dealer comes in again. They'll have 9,500 kinds of wire and adapters and can probably make up anything they don't

Thoughts From Mid-West America (cont.)

have. You can just bring in your stuff or your manuals and say "I need to hook this to that," stand back and wait for the right part. And then buy an extra! Seriously, you have to have extra connection wires because they take all the abuse!

Every different kind of connector wire you use should have at least one back up. If you use multiple wires of the same style (like 6 identical mike cables) then as a rule of thumb divide the number of cables you need by 3, rounding up, and get that many extras. As long as you are playing with wires, once you buy everything label each and every wire at both ends with where it needs to go. I like to color code connections (like everything going to the back of the amp get red tags and everything in front gets blue) with labels that then have the specific jack written on them (channel 1, right speaker, CD in, etc.). If you have several similar items, like speakers or mikes, then name each one (Speaker A, B, C and D or mikes 1, 2, 3, and such). This way anyone could, if needed, fill in and plug everything together. It also allows for quick visual inspections!

You probably could start looking at systems about now. Don't forget question five: how much junk can you haul around? Balancing weight and size with features is important and, depending on your personality, one side of that equation will be an absolute! You will find that, if you are willing to spend the loot, there are some surprisingly powerful small speaker boxes out there. Plastic housings may lighten the load a bit, too, but most of the weight of a speaker box is the actual speaker unit inside. As long as they can handle the power of your system, you can get away with smaller speaker boxes because, like with the mikes, you don't need the dynamic range that a musician would and that is often the drawback of the smaller speakers; they don't have the range for good music reproduction. That makes them more affordable, too. And don't worry about them being too small, either, because you will want to mount them on collapsible speaker stands anyway. Many box mixers will be fairly small. There are several 100 Watt, four channel box mixers out there at are about the size of a shoe box. Stack two of those shoe boxes together and you'll have the approximate size of many 6 or 8 channel 200 Watt setups.

An arrangement I haven't mentioned yet, because it gets to be a bit more complicated, is to not use a combo or a box mixer but to use a power amp and a mixing board. A power amp is a unit that is simply an amplifier, allowing no more control than a volume adjustment. A mixing board is a flat affair that could have anywhere from three to dozens of channels (they are pretty big, though). Obviously, this means more cable and complications and, honestly, mixing boards are more complex affairs than box mixers. There are mixing boards that have built in power amps, called powered mixers, that cut down the complications a bit, but they don't get too powerful and are still generally more complex to operate than box mixers. Still, they may be worth it based on size or price factors.

We still haven't talked about your sound plan yet, but you can start window shopping for systems now. There are so many options out there... you can get packaged systems or buy ala cart and then there are all those used pieces, too! Best to leave off here and pick up from the sound plan next month when we can match the features and function you need with your act. Until then, answer your questions and draw up your sound plan. This should be a complete script noting when each mike's use starts and stops, as well as any background music, prerecorded bits and volume changes. This will be mandatory when it comes to determining what control options you will require.

Whew! That's a lot, huh? See why I said you would need to reread it? Give it a few minutes and come on back. Remember, this is going to be a huge purchase so it is worth taking all the extra time!

By Michael L.

Developing a Performance Character

Developing a Performance Character...

...and the birth of Alucard

By Gary Scott



The art of character development is a tricky one. Many try and fail. Many think that a dab of make-up and a funny voice will do. What I'm about to do is write about why I developed my alter-ego and why it works so well. The character I play is Alucard van Horn. A powerful vampyre from the Carpathians. I always wanted to write down my stages of character development for Alucard but never got the chance. Besides, my magic brother, Michael Jay, has been wanting me to write this for ages.

I've had this particular article, floating around in my mind for almost a year. A character to suit a certain type of performance is a difficult concept to grasp without previous experience in such things... *or is it?* What I am about to write will no doubt cause a bit of controversy with all the theatrical 'luvvies' out there, but on the whole, I think, that you will see that character development is not just about *acting!*

To begin with, I would like to tell the story of Alucard's creation...

In November 2004, I was visiting Michael Jay in Toledo. We were both to star in a show at the Magic Cavern in February 2005, with fellow magi Doc and Jonathan B. Mike was the 'main event' and it was up to the '3 Amigos' to provide the rest of the show. Knowing the other guys well and their performance styles, I wanted to do something different. I didn't want the show to be about three 'cheesy' magicians, followed by Mike. What was I going to do? One day during my trip to Mike's, we went to see Ron Bauer. On the drive there I noticed a sign for a freeway exit. It said: "Van Horn". I thought about how cool that was and how it sounded like a town out of the twilight zone, like a point of no return. I also thought that it would be a cool name for a vampire or demon. I started mucking around with a 'Transylvanian accent' and Mike was laughing at how stupid this all was. It took about another 20 minutes from this point to realise that we 'had something'. Here we had a name, an accent and some ideas about what I wanted to do come that night in February. During the rest of my stay, it seemed that our entire time was spent searching for costume and effects for Van Horn.

I returned home with a purpose. To create an act of pure emotional impact. The Alucard portion of the name came a few days later. I needed more than just the 'Van Horn'. It seemed logical, as a vampyre, the name Dracula spelt backwards would be perfect... and the rest is history.

With that in mind, let's begin our look into the breakdown of character development. So... now I have a character idea with a name... what do I do?

First, this character has to be you. A part of your natural personality. If you are Mr. fluffy bunny, don't bother trying to get into a role that is a dark and brooding. I am fortunate that I have a natural dark nature. With this Alucard Van Horn character, I can actually be that part of myself, whilst throwing in a good dose of fantasy. This character also reflects my personal interest in horror, the occult and all things that go bump in the night. I adore the idea of the vampire, with its all powerful magic and selfish superiority over 'lesser' beings. I spent 4 months working on the characters voice, effects, persona and presence.

Q. WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE?

A simple question with a difficult answer. This is of course in relation to a 'magic' performing character. 'Look at Yourself' was one of the topics I have discussed before in Top Hat, and its relevance is clear. Who are you? Will you feel comfortable in performing the character? Is the character a natural extension of your own personality?

Only you can answer these, but you must answer them honestly.

Developing a Performance Character (cont.)

Q. WHO IS THE CHARACTER?

Alucard Van Horn is the most powerful, vampyric magician there has ever been.

So everything he does, must reflect that. He is nearly 200 hundred years old. He has limitless power. I must design effects that are appropriate to this. If this character was real, what would he be doing... magically? The answer is: anything he wants. Magic is just a toy to him, so he toys with magic. I have developed some manipulation/sleight of hand routines that work well. He tells great stories of soul seeking/destroying. He performs magic to show off his power. He has no fear, no soul and is master of the dark arts.

With the knowledge of your character's traits, now you must define how you project that character to an audience. This is done through drama, story-telling and the effects that you choose to perform.

A word to all the potential 'character' magicians out there!

There is a unique niche and performing platform for character magicians. This uniqueness, unfortunately, also garners limited performance opportunities in the real world. The best thing to do is hire a community hall or theatre and build your own performance schedule. My role of Alucard can only be played in certain venues and play to certain audiences as it is can be very deep psychologically and emotionally. Definitely not a PG rating. I *can* tone down the character when doing magic around tables or for corporate folks, but that kind of takes away the appeal of what Alucard is all about and demeans his character by not being 'dark' enough. In my regular magic work, I prefer to remain as Gary Scott 'The Hot Shot'... Alucard is left for special occasions, Halloween and theatre, but always a part of me.

Oh yeah, don't forget 'luvvies'... you must go to a performing school of some kind. *NOT!* Oh no... what have I done? Upset the masses? Magic in its purest form is a performance art and so we all express it in different ways and choose to study it in different ways. I combine my love of pro-wrestling and martial arts and my love of all things horror in the way I want to project my character to the audience. I am not a 'luvvie' type of character associated with studying acting. I have trained in projecting myself in other forms that I am more comfortable with. This is how you must be and will what make you ultimately successful. Being comfortable in who you are and how you study your role. You are not inferior and will NOT be an inferior magician because you do not choose to study acting. There are many other dramatic arts that can benefit your magic studies and you may choose one of these instead.

Q. WHAT WILL THE AUDIENCE PERCEIVE IN MY PERFORMANCE?

Whatever you wish to project to them as long as it is entertaining, full of style and most importantly... magical. I would recommend that you perform for a non-magician performance artist, possibly a director of some kind. A great professional once told me to "think of act directors as more of act doctors." They will heal all your wounds and clean you up. Before this though, make sure you have your act as YOU want it and try to convey to the director what you want the act to be like. Yes it will change, but it will be all the better for it. It will be a difficult time to give up some of the stuff that you have worked so hard on. The *director* will get you through all your teething problems and will help you have a more rounded act.

I have addressed the issue of being magical more important than entertaining. Within the confines of a magical performance, an entertaining presentation should be a natural commodity within the character you wish to play. Entertainment or entertaining should not even be an issue. Without the magic, you may as well be just an actor or a comedian on the stage. Without the magic, the magician does not exist.

Take your ideals, your beliefs, your interests, your magic. Combine them into an entertaining magical package that you wish to present. Succeed or fail? Who knows... but the without the journey, there is no destination.

Good luck to you all.

Have a great 2006.
Siya all on Magic Bunny...

Best wishes
Gary Scott