

# **The Magic of Magic**

By Ben Hurwitz, Spring 2020

## **Introduction**

Is magic real? Sometimes, it's more about the feeling of magic in the air than the trick itself. Making a feeling of magic is built off of illusion and sleight of hand. The art of magic builds on three major components: skill, story, and secrecy. Along with the three significant elements of magic, there are also three different types of magic: Up-close magic performed on the street, parlor magic performed in bars, and lastly, stage magic performed in front of hundreds of people. This essay explores these topics by describing how magicians, their magic props, and the art of magic relate to one another.

## **What makes a bad magician?**

Picture this: you are in a restaurant, and a magician walks up to your table. He asks if he can show you a magic trick. You accept, but as soon as he starts, you already feel yourself rolling your eyes. The magician starts his story; it is very dull and makes you look elsewhere. You notice something odd about his thumb and are suspicious. You remember seeing this trick before; it's the one with the handkerchief coming out of thin air. You look again to see if he's hiding something, and sure enough, you see a little bit of red. When he pulls a red handkerchief out of thin air, your suspicions are confirmed: it was in a false thumb the whole time. Another person at your table asks to see it again because they want to figure out how he did the trick. The magician proceeds to do the trick again and ruins it. Everyone at the table now knows how the trick works. The magician ridicules a woman for pointing out how the trick works. No one is enjoying the experience, and the magician leaves abruptly. The magician should never have

performed the trick so poorly, shown the trick twice, or made anyone feel uncomfortable. This essay will explore what makes a good magician.

### **The three steps of magic**

Magic is about making the audience feel a sense of wonder. There are a few essential parts to a successful magic act. The first part is skill. The skill behind most magic tricks is mastering the sleight of hand and misdirection required for that magic trick. Michael Ammar, in his book *Complete Intro to Coin Magic*, tells us that sleight of hand is about skillfully concealing an object, whereas misdirection is about diverting the audience's attention. Both sleights of hand and misdirection are about the art of skillful deception (31). The second part is about the story behind a trick and how well it flows. I think a story that flows well makes the audience feel a certain way, which the magician guides them through. When watching a magician and listening to their story, it should feel like it fits with the magic trick smoothly. The third part is the secrecy behind a magic trick; it is better to be amazed than know how a magic trick is done. A good magician never reveals their magic tricks. If the magician explains the secret, you immediately lose interest in the magic and confidence in the magician (Hurwitz).

Christopher Priest offers another angle on the matter. In his opinion, there are three core aspects of a successful magic act: "The Pledge," "The Turn," and "The Prestige" (209). He describes the pledge as inspecting an ordinary object, the turn as changing the ordinary to extraordinary, and the prestige as bringing the extraordinary back to ordinary. For example, in the "pledge", the magician usually shows the audience a familiar object (such as a coin or deck of cards) to

establish a sense of trust (Priest), page 209). In the “turn”, the magician changes the ordinary object by either making it disappear or turning it into something else (Priest), page 209). In “prestige”, the magician establishes awe by making the object what it was original; in his words, “making something disappear is not enough; you have to bring it back” (Priest), page 209).

### **What is coin magic?**

Coin magic is a skill-based branch of magic that every magician must know. Coins are a relatable magic prop. It is something the spectator uses every day and is familiar with. Most coin magic involves disappearing or reappearing. It requires sleight of hand and misdirection, which are undetectable to the audience when well-practiced. One of Penn’s most famous quotes states, “this is not juggling; this is called misdirection”(Williams), meaning the magician will do everything in their power to distract the audience while performing sleight of hand. Sleight of the hand requires not only misdirection but also excellent motor skills. In the words of JB Bobo, “I’m one of those fellows who enjoys working with his hands -- learning crafts and skills that require delicacy of touch fascinate me”(15). Sleight of hand can only be achieved through practice. J.B Bobo claims, “people admire and appreciate skill; coin magic impresses them as magic requiring skill” (17). However, not every coin trick requires skill; in fact, some just require contraptions you can buy. For example, gaf coins are fake coins that usually use a series of springs and levers (Hurwitz). Most of the time, gaf coins can’t be inspected, lest the inspector sees the other side of the coin, where the contraption is. That is why the magician must have an exceptionally distracting story, which will allow them to get away with a lot more (Hurwitz). Gaf coins do not require much practice, but coin magic does -- to be great at anything requires

practice. There are three stages of practicing a magic trick. First, you learn how to do the trick. When learning a trick, it is essential to get a clear understanding of the method. If you practice the trick the wrong way when you are learning it, believe me, it is a hard hole to climb out of. Learning a trick the wrong way and adding a variation is not the same thing. When you add a variation, you are doing so to a trick you already know, but when you are learning a trick you don't know much about, the trick has an entirely new set of rules. Secondly, you practice the trick. When practicing a trick, mindful repetition is the key to developing muscle memory for that trick. Conscious repetition simply means doing the trick over and over in a conscious way. Lastly, you practice even more. Did I mention repetition yet?

### **Who was J.B Bobo?**

Making coins disappear, and making children's smiles appear, J.B. Bobo (1910-1996) was a revolutionary in coin magic. At age twelve, J.B. Bobo became interested in coin magic after seeing a magic show. In the show, he watched as coins did amazing things, making him long to know the magician's secrets. His uncle knew a few tricks which he gladly taught young Bobo. After learning these tricks and watching more magic shows, his interest gradually increased. Many years later and after much practice, J.B. Bobo created his magic act. J.B. Bobo traveled all over the country, doing magic shows for all audiences young and old, from elementary schools to churches. An advertisement for his show described his magic as "Easy to present anywhere" (Bobo). His performances "crystallized into action that glorious curiosity in the unbelievable, the supernatural, and the impossible that enters into the making of a magician"(93-101). During the many years of performance, he amassed a vast amount of knowledge. Based on this, he wrote the

*New Modern Coin Magic*, which has 400+ tricks, sleights, and palms. The book he wrote long outlived him and is the quintessential guide for all coin magic. J.B. Bobo died in Texarkana at the age of 86, but his work lives on in his book, which is often called “The Coin Magic Bible”.

### **What are magic props?**

“You only see what the magician wants you to see,” says Michael Crownhart, a local magician and mentor from Tucson, Arizona. Magic props are used by the magician to make the illusion feel more real; seeing is believing. A magic prop may look like an ordinary object but have hidden compartments such as trap doors and false bottoms (Hurwitz). Once a magician learns how to use the prop, it requires little skill. Instead, the magician must be able to tell an intriguing and distracting story to pull the attention away from the prop (Hurwitz). The illusion must feel real, or the audience will realize that they are being tricked. A self-working magic trick is a trick designed in a certain way as to need little skill by the magician. However, they can only be shown once because they are simple and easy to figure out. Ammar points out, if the trick always produced the same result, you would get suspicious. Adults can also enjoy magic props. Instead of having goofy artwork, they can have elegant borders. Magical props are used on a stage because they need to be big enough for a whole audience of 200+ people to see the trick (Bobo 209). As described in *The World’s Greatest Magic*, “to entertain those at the back of the theater, the performer had to heighten the impact of his effects and personality” (48) Visual distractions like art and design play into misdirection. In the end, the story is what distracts and engages the audience. A magician wants to utilize all of these distractions to overload the audience with details, making the trick more comfortable to perform.

### **How do you build a magic act?**

So-and-so said, “Magic is like learning chords on a guitar; once you know a few, you can use them to build a magic act”(Williams). The first part is learning the magic act. Importantly, the tricks should work well together; this is called “flow” (Hurwitz). Part of this flow is creating a story; the reason the story must flow is to make sure nothing distracts from the trick. It is almost like the magician puts the audience in a trance. Another way you can divert a spectator’s attention is with flourishes: adding them in a magic act will make it look even more eye-catching. Examples of flourishes are card shuffles, wand twirling, or coin rolls (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Coin rolls across knuckles (wikiHow)*

The second step is developing your style because that is what builds your reputation. Having a good reputation is vital to attracting people to your shows. Having a well-practiced and thought

out routine leads to a good reputation. The first example of someone who had a good magic act is Houdini who had a reputation for being an escape artist (Houdini). In his book *Houdini on magic*, he describes how his death-defying shows helped him become more popular (Houdini). Unfortunately, he couldn't escape death and drowned during a show, which is what he is known for today(121). Another famous magic act is from Penn and Teller, who are known for being polar opposites. They each bring something unique to their act. Penn brings a comedic relief to their magic acts, and ironically Teller is silent. Teller talks about his unique style in an interview: "I thought it would be interesting to drop patter so that people would have to put together what there looking at on their own." He then goes on to explain, "nothing fools you better than the lie you tell yourself"(Williams). For example, if a magician told you he had an ordinary deck of cards, would you believe him? Penn and Teller are dramatically different from each other, which brings together their magic act in an excellent way. A magician can have about any style, but they just need to use it in the right way.

### **What is the business of magic?**

How do magicians stay in business? To answer this question, we must look at what a magician does. Magicians are performers and actors, so naturally, magicians perform for birthday parties, cruise ships, and charity events. Some magicians perform for a living, but others might own a magic shop(Hurwitz). Magic shops sell tricks, information, and gadgets to stay in business. It is generally frowned upon to sell information on how a trick is done, but magic shops tend to bend the rules to stay in business. Another way magic shops stay in business is by intriguing you. When you walk into a magic shop, the owner will try to show you a trick. The longer you stay,

the more likely you are to buy something (Hurwitz). If you pay more for a gimmick than the magician did, he makes a profit. Magic tricks are not very good quality, so this is not hard to do.

### **What were my experiences?**

The best way to get involved in something is to dive in headfirst. When I was starting my project on magic, I went to the magic store at Trail Dust Town to learn how to get started. At the magic shop, I was introduced to the Society of American Magicians (SAM). SAM is a local club that meets on the first Monday of every month. I am a youth member, and my mentor, Michael Crownhart, is a member. My mentor meets me every other Saturday and teaches me the art of magic. Magic not only includes magic tricks but how to perform them for an audience. I recently inherited an old magic collection from the late Gary Vance. Gary Vance was a school teacher who enjoyed magic and performing for elementary school kids. It took me two days to sort through it all. In his magic collection, there were a lot of expensive magic books, magic tricks, and gaf coins. You name it; he had it! For my project, I studied books, watched interviews, documentaries, and other resources. My end goal is making a positive effect on someone's life, by showing them a magic trick they will never forget.

### **Conclusion**

As a magician, my main goal is to astonish people. My mentor, Michael Crownhart, always says, "the point of magic is to awe people, not make them look like fools." Magic is not just a trick but can have a lasting impact on the audience. Magic is a form of entertainment; therefore, a magician strives to create an unforgettable experience. The magician does this by combining

skill, story, and secrecy. Sometimes knowing how a trick works isn't as important as being merely confused.

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