

November 2016 Meeting. The Swadlings are back!

Posted on [November 28, 2016](#) by [Dennis Phillips](#)

Ring Report Ring #170 “The Bev Bergeron Ring” SAM Assembly #99 November 2016 Meeting

President Craig Schwarz called the November meeting to order. 28 were present. We welcomed guests, Landon, Lexi, Logan and Loren Galloway and also guest Burt Univan from Ring 50. Val Swadling is back after illness. President Craig treated us by performing a card trick. A selected card was found printed on the wrapping paper around the deck. Next month we have nominations for next year’s board.

Bev Bergeron’s teach-in featured a Jack Chanin effect of making a packet of sugar (or salt) disappear from a handkerchief with no thumb tip!

Phil Schwartz presented Magic History Moment #81 – “How To Present Magic.” It was a look at Dariel Fitzkee, the author of the famous three books known as The Fitzkee trilogy: Showmanship for Magicians, the Trick Brain and Magic by Misdirection. The late Tommy Wonder said that he learned English so he could read Fitzkee. Comedian and one-time magicians, Steve Martin praised Fitzkee. Phil continued his talk about acting and presentation and mentioned Konstantin Stanislavsky who wrote about acting methods. The entertainer communicates an experience. Phil closed with tribute to Nate Leipzig , who was called a “magicians magician” , “the king of manipulators” and “the most expert prestidigitator in the world”. Phil read an article Leipzig wrote praising his teachers — an actor, a basso opera singer and a pantomimist.

President Schwarz opened the monthly show with spectator selected card. The deck was separated into three piles and the top cards reveled value, color and suit of the card. Mark Fitzgerald changed two \$1 bills into a \$2 bill. A spectator selected a card and when counting off it was the last card. Finally he did the naughty but delightful “Kate and Edith”. Dan Stapleton caused a rope to penetrate a spectator’s finger and then did some fancy vanishing knots. David Freeman did a Christmas story about “finding the pickle” and was able to tell the color of a rod while hidden by a spectator in a metal case.

James F. Bailey III had a volunteer select card and then revealed the card. Finally Bob Swadling presented a signature routine. He explained how to win at poker. Two cards kept changing values and a hand of cards one by one disappeared leaving the red queen. A torn card was restored to the queen and a deck of 52 blank cards became printed and he was able to cut to any card called for!

Dennis Phillips

Dennis Deliberations ... Ring # 170



December 2016

“We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

– Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*

Okay... David Blaine. He is back, puking up frogs and shooting himself in the mouth. Should I say more? I saw it as more of a carnival geek show than magic.

Blaine & ABC/Disney’s target audience is most certainly not the “local magic get together” or any of us who are a part of traditional magic.

But, Blaine is working and getting paid more than I am for doing magic. He barfs up frogs, I eat crow.

I think the best trick David did, or at least the one I liked the best, was the “finger *ring on the coat-hanger*”. He appears to swallow a borrowed man’s wedding ring, and then swallows a coat-hanger, and brings it back up with the ring clearly linked on it. As regards to his bullet catch (If he was doing it for real and I have my doubts because I know about the insurance that networks buy to protect their investments), I think he has a death wish, and I don’t respect that in the least. They say he’s going to do that regularly while on tour. Life is too precious for that nonsense. When he mentions that 12 people died doing the Bullet Catch as a trick (that statistic is about right), we read that one of the deaths involved some skeptical moron at one of the shows shouting something to the effect of, “*Okay, so you think you’re so smart catching a bullet. Try catching THIS!*” – whereupon, the dude pulled out a gun and shot the magician dead. At least that’s one of the stories, even if might not be true. But it makes a point: I think that is one of the risks in this day and age that Blaine might be courting. There are too many unstable idiots in this world. Anyone who goes around bragging they are “bullet-proof”, for example, would be just begging to be shot.

I was generally underwhelmed by this Special. One can do incredible magic that builds a legendary reputation without having to put physical health at risk or spend far too much time explaining of how he prepared for the trick.

There is a Twilight Zone story about a guy who sold his soul to the devil for immortality. He maniacally jumped in front a rapidly moving vehicle, dived out of a high window of a tall building, and pulled other such deadly stunts that would have killed a normal man.

But then... towards the end of the story, he made a major mistake: He killed someone so he could “give the electric chair a whirl.” But instead of being electrocuted as was his plan, *he was sentenced to life imprisonment!* The final scene shows him sitting in total shock and despair on the edge of his cot in jail, and as we hear the chilling laughter of the devil, the guy slowly keels over DEAD. Rod Serling, Twilight Zone creator and writer, then cuts in to say something philosophically profound.

I think we all could imagine a similar story about an egomaniacal magician (guess who!) who “plays the dance of death” for fame and fortune. But then, one fateful day, the inevitable happens. And in comes the haunting voice of Rod Serling to ruminate on how foolish the fellow was.....

As in all Blaine’s Specials, the focus is on audience reactions.

1) Reactions like those are kind of “old hat”. When he first burst on the scene with his first television show some fifteen-or-twenty years ago [where does the time go??], it was the crazy hyper-reactions of *street people* to his magic that had every reviewer (as well as the magic world!) going ga-ga. It was a novel approach for magic on TV back then that had never been seen before. With *stage* illusions and even general magic *on the stage*, theatre audiences are much more subdued — like I’m telling you something you don’t know! To belabor the point: You wouldn’t see any theatre-goers jumping up and down on their seats and freaking out, no matter how great the magic was.

2) My second observation, is that with both Blaine’s first early TV Special and today’s — his street magic played to a lot to *teenagers and very young adults*. Most young people are basically still a little on the “air-headed” side (not a criticism, even if I put it rather crudely); if you probed the *beliefs* of such people, I’m willing to bet many of them would believe in ghosts, goblins, and things that go bump in the night. More succinctly, they haven’t the scientific background, let alone the cognitive smarts of a seasoned skeptic to know what is real and what is nonsense in this crazy mixed-up world of ours. A big reason for this, is that they’ve been steeped in a steady diet of staggeringly ridiculous plot-lines in movies, television shows, comic books, magazines, second-rate science fiction and so on, and all of this “media madness” heavily promotes the paranormal, UFOs, New Age superstition, religious dogma, Sword-and-Sorcery, tales of horror, and J.K. Rowling fantasies showing children running around generating CGI-laden “magic” by waving silly brown pointy sticks! So it isn’t any wonder that any competent magician can come along and easily “fry” their gullible sensibilities with a few clever card tricks and a bit of sophisticated mentalism.

The Decline of Magic

It seems that rapidly changing times have now caused magic and its relatively insular world to wind down, at least for a while. Its yearly conventions, after many decades of stability and success, are now struggling to survive. One long-time annual conference, a virtual institution among the magicians in its area, has recently had to call it a day. The leading independent Magic Magazine is no more. Being paper and ink may have hurt it in a digital age but apparently it was not worth the transition to the Internet. Young blood is no longer infusing the magic community at a rate that is able to “stabilize” its population, let alone keep it expanding, as older magicians and magic enthusiasts retire

from the scene. Are there other reasons for magic's malaise? An attempt to answer this question leads us to some disturbing conclusions.

Revolutionary advances in science and technology, especially during the last dozen or so years, has been instrumental in altering the cultural landscape and attracting the rapt attention of the masses. Computers, video gaming, and mobile communications devices are now ubiquitous, and as a consequence, magic as we know and love it has been shunted off to the side, and so very far away from public awareness that for all intents and purposes it has become pretty-much *invisible* to the world. Today, millions of people are immersed in video games, texting, and online socializing through Twitter and Facebook. The video game industry alone has blossomed into a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, exceeding the combined revenues of the entire movie industry. And this is all in addition to the traditional offline activities that flourished well before the Internet and dozens of electronic distractions burst on the scene: sports, rock music, television, and movies exploding on the silver screen with ever-escalating special effects and in glorious 3D. Magicians everywhere are sinking into a mental funk with the realization that their talents are no longer at the forefront of the public's consciousness — if indeed, they ever were.

But many magicians beg to differ. Some of the elder stalwarts of magic like to tell us magic has always been *cyclical*. That is to say, the art of magic always keeps renewing itself every twenty, thirty, or even fifty years. To back-up such assertions, they cite the big touring shows of the first half of the 20th century by the likes of Blackstone, Thurston, and Dante; and the rise of television magic stars Doug Henning and David Copperfield in a post-hippy era; and the decades-long popularity of eclectic magic shows in Las Vegas. Even the ragamuffin 'bastard child' called *Street Magic* is cited as still another "wonderful" indication that magic is constantly re-inventing itself anew. ... So what's the worry? We're only in a temporary *down cycle* right now!

But dare we ask: Will we ever see discussions of this situation in magic's club journals, or in its major magazines? It is doubtful. When a particular kind of entertainment begins its to falter, whether by imploding from within or simply dwindling away for lack of adequate public support, it rarely becomes a serious topic of internal dialogue among its practitioners. Magic today, as exemplified by its monthly magazines and its organization's journals, seem to be blissfully living in a fuzzy-warm state of perpetual denial.

Perhaps we could suggest that one arguable reason for the alleged "silence" on this matter, stems from the very nature of the magic journals themselves: funding comes from dealer advertisements aimed at selling magic apparatus, books, and DVDs. What magic publications need, are a few more voices of positive *self-criticism and balance*. One thoughtful voice from the past was "Senator" Clarke Crandall (1906-1975). Crandall was an Abbotts' and Magic Castle legend with his long curled moustache and cowboy hat and boots. He had a way of cutting to the chase in his observations of magic and magicians. It is best not to abuse the art of magic, because he was open with his rebukes. (Often Mark Kornhauser's column in Magic Magazine is reflectively "Crandall-like" in its honesty. But he is among a minority these days.) Many young magicians used to think that the curmudgeonly "Senator" was just an angry old

man, but as those same magicians grew older and wiser themselves, they realized it was honesty shaped by experiential insight and wisdom. Crandall risked offending some for the sake of truth and in support of the magical art in general.

Much of the credit for the revival of magic, which was on life-support in the early 60s, was *The Magic Castle*. (Mark Wilson and Bev's weekly show also helped) The Castle was a venue that was far more than a private night club. It became the focal point for magic celebrities and the best of the art. If the Castle's concept could extend to other major cities, it could keep the art alive. We recall the Comedy Clubs that formed to keep the art of comedy alive and they were successful. Magic certainly isn't likely to die completely, but it can and *should* remain a vital and continuing niche in the performing arts.

There is also one other controversial monkey wrench in the gears that we consider axiomatic, and you've heard it before: Magic dealers on the Internet. An explosion of online commerce by virtually every business on the planet has resulted in this formerly "niche" business jumping online as well. Magic is a great performing art, but the business of selling its props is a peculiar one. The typical magic shop used to exist (and "exist" is the proper term) almost exclusively as a low-profile business not given to advertising to the general public. In an effort to make our point, just try to imagine the following bizarre scenario: A citizen opens up his morning newspaper and sees the following advertisement: "SLICKO'S TRICK-AND-JOKE SHOP is having the SALE OF THE CENTURY! Come on down today! Slicko's is featuring ZIG ZAGS, SUB TRUNKS and LEVITATIONS at *ROCK BOTTOM PRICES!*" The traditional paradigm of the commercial magic dealer, once relegated to quaint little street magic shops and discrete "backroom" emporiums that only the serious magic aficionado was aware of — *is now dead*. Sure, many dealers eventually developed a thriving business through mail-order too, but that was still well under the radar compared to the gigantic visibility potential of the World Wide Web. When the dealers took the economic 'high road' online, they inadvertently threw the ethical 'low road' to the wolves when they started advertising magic's wares indiscriminately to *all the world*. It represented nothing less than that newspaper metaphor, writ large. The result is that in going online, the magic shops underwent an almost Frankensteinian transformation as they exploded into the public's consciousness. Irrespective of the fact it may have been good for the economic health of many of the magic companies, was this, in the long run, really good for magic? Before the personal computer and the worldwide web became ubiquitous, there were people who would be so amazed by a magic effect that some of them would feel compelled to ask in astonishment, "*Where did you ever learn to do that?*" Such an odd question may seem naive, but it told the tale: that people half-believed (or *wanted* to believe) that magicians were "privy to an exclusive art", and that such an art seemed all the more exotic and mysterious for its apparent *lack of origins*. What the viewer didn't know, he didn't *need* to know: that magic books are available in every public library; that there are monthly magic clubs for amateur magicians who talk shop and perform for each other; and that there are some exclusive magic fraternities (like London's Magic Circle) that are almost pathologically secretive, while other, much larger international magic organizations are so "open" that they will seemingly admit just about anyone with the mildest interest in magic.

In spite of the many symptoms that we've outlined here that suggests magic may be on the ropes for good, my diagnosis may not be all that convincing. Perhaps the old guard

are right after all: that magic will still recycle itself once again. Through the creative efforts of progressive thinkers like Marco Tempest and Jason Latimer, we might see a “new renaissance” in magic that could conceivably blow-off the barnacles of a bygone era and steer a refurbished conjuring “ship” majestically into a world of ever-advancing technological wonders. In his day, the great 19th century French conjuror *Robert Houdin* did much the same thing by updating his attire and streamlining his tables and props. He employed clockwork automation in his performances, and disguised the then-novel discoveries of electromagnetism, anesthetics, and chemistry to look like *pure magic*. And a century or so later, a progressive *David Copperfield* revitalized magic in the latter half of the 20th century by jettisoning the arcane boxes and outdated theatrics and costuming, and in so doing, totally retrofitted the art of magic for modern times. The pre-internet times, that is.

But now, after some 20 to 30 years of creative paralysis, we find ourselves immersed in a hyper-technological new century, and so we see the need for a major magic transformation once again. The world is changing at a seemingly breakneck pace, and along with it, the ways and means with which we entertain ourselves.

If the first part of this essay seems overly pessimistic, it was not meant to be anything other than constructive. We all know that “something” is seriously amiss in the world of magic, but rather than fall into a state of denial, we felt it would be more productive to look the patient squarely in the eye and try to determine some of the principle causes for magic’s “cyclic malaise”. It is only *then* that we all will be able to examine the possible future directions magic should take in order to keep it not only alive, but *vibrantly healthy*. The magic world sorely needs more forward-thinking geniuses the likes which we mentioned above and it needs venues, places that showcase magic and the variety arts. We need the creative dreamers who will stay ahead of the curve by exercising the foresight and courage to redefine one of the greatest of the performing arts. It will be through their efforts, and *your* efforts, that magic will again be able to dazzle the world, and thereby propel it deeply into the 21st century — *and beyond*.

“We should have hired a professional magician!” How many times I have heard that?

Who needs a professional magician?

Who needs professional politicians, either? (As if being an experienced professional is somehow bad)

We could also ask: **Who needs career surgeons or lawyers? We can learn everything off of You Tube. Let’s give others a chance!**

I can hardly wait until a carpenter tries his hand at neurosurgery, and a cab driver is permitted to defend the carpenter in court because his patient died from the “surgeon” closing him up with a nail gun...

Who needs a professional educator? Just get the right software and you don’t need a teacher.

Professional pilots? Let a computer fly the plane with an engine out and an airport socked in.

And politicians? Who needs them? Anyone can write laws, determine policy and negotiate with foreign leaders.

I am all for non-professional people taking responsibility and understanding the basics of any profession and in some ways, I agree with George Bernard Shaw , who said, 'All professions are conspiracies against the laity.'

But there is a place for an experienced trained professional and we should respect and use them when needed.

Dennis