

Acting and Showmanship In Magic

by Coe Norton

Coe was invited to deliver a talk to the members of New York City IBM Ring 26 at one of their Lab sessions, in 1964. The I.B.M. International Secretary, Irving M. Lewis, introduced Coe, and afterwards encouraged him to publish it. "I'm not a writer", Coe protested, but Lewis continued to prod him into publishing. Finally Coe spoke the talk into a tape recorder, and had the following transcribed. It appeared in the Linking Ring, October, 1964, and was later reprinted in the Magic Manuscript.

I am sure that a lot of what I have to say will not be new to many of you, but it is pretty fundamental stuff and will bear repeating. Very often we feel we know something because we have heard it or read it before. But do we really? Psychologists and educators tell us that learning comes primarily through repetition. And it takes a lot of repetition before we really know something, even just in our head. And just knowing it in our head doesn't mean we know it in our heart; that it has become a part of us, something we do automatically or instinctively.

A very fine French actor, Jean-Louis Barrault, in a wonderful treatise on acting said: "To know something *really*, means to have learned it once, and then forgotten it, and then found it again inside yourself." So, if I can help you to come closer to this sort of organic understanding of the value of acting and showmanship in magic, I hope it will be worthwhile.

A good place to start anything like this is to define our terms. We are talking about acting and showmanship in magic. So we have three terms: Acting, Showmanship, and Magic.

What is the definition of Acting? A man named Boleslavski who did a great deal of writing on the subject defined acting thus: "Acting is the life of the human soul receiving its birth through art."

Well, that's a rather vague and somewhat metaphysical definition, and not too helpful. Webster gives this definition: "Acting: To perform as an actor." Again, that is not too helpful. But Webster has another definition of acting which at first would not seem to be related to theater: "To act is to do something." And to me this is probably the most valuable definition that you can have of acting. We will come back to this later.

Our next term is Showmanship. Showmanship can best be defined as the ability to consider performance from the viewpoint of the spectator. It is a recognition of its performer's first duty, which is to entertain. Showmanship involves selectivity; selectivity in choice of material, in style of performance, in characterization. Showmanship involves timing, pointing, pacing, building to climaxes, emphasis, routining; all of the elements resulting from the awareness that you are before an audience and the necessity of capturing and holding their attention and gaining the greatest audience response. I don't intend to dwell on the subject of showmanship too much at this time. It is a subject which has been thoroughly covered in great detail by Dariel Fitzkee in his book, *Showmanship for Magicians*. Also, recently in *Genii* there has been an excellent and very comprehensive series running on showmanship for magicians by Dr. Eugene Gloye. Both of these, the Fitzkee book and the Gloye articles, I recommend most highly.

The next term is Magic - as we are considering it now - Magic for Entertainment. Webster gives this definition: "The pretended performance of those things which cannot be done." The Encyclopedia has this definition: "A form of entertainment which is based on pretending to do things which everyone knows is impossible. The conjurer is an especially trained actor." Jean Hugard in *Hugard's Magic Monthly* for October 1955 gave his definition: "Magic is the art of entertaining by the performance of feats which appear to be contrary to natural law. It follows, therefore, that

the best definition of a magician is: A magician is an actor playing the part of a wizard."

Therefore, from all these sources, *a magician is first of all an actor.* Therefore, magic is first of all acting and, therefore, good magic means good acting. They are synonymous. Magician and actor are synonymous. Magic and acting are synonymous. Good acting and good magic are synonymous. So, I will be talking mostly about what makes for good acting and how, as magicians, we can use that knowledge.

The only real difference between the actor and the magician is that the magician always plays the same part (and in a sense all magicians play the same part) - the Miracle Man, the man who can do the impossible. But you say, magicians differ in the way in which they play that part. True. But it is true of acting also. There have been many great Hamlets, for instance, each a brilliant, inspired characterization; and each differing as the personalities and interpretations of the actors differed. And don't be misled by the fact that the magician usually plays essentially himself. The hardest first lesson of the actor is learning to play himself on stage or before a camera. Characterization can best be described as: *Yourself* under conditions imposed by the author. In the case of the magician, if he does work "in character", he himself is the author.

There is one more definition. This one is from John Mulholland. He defines magic as: "Magic is the art of creating illusion agreeably." Here is another word that's come up several times - *art*. Boleslawski defined acting as "The life of the human soul receiving its birth through *art*." Jean Hugard said, "Magic is the art of entertaining by the performance of feats which appear to be contrary to natural law." And we have Mulholland saying, "Magic is the art of creating illusion agreeably." So, let's try to define art.

One of the briefest definitions of art I know is: "Art is something expressed in terms of something else, plus something which has never been added to it before." For instance, a painter paints a sunset. That painting is that sunset expressed in terms of line, mass and color on a two-dimensional plane, plus the something that that particular artist gives it which makes it different from that same sunset painted by any other artist. A man named Seldon in a book called *The Player's Handbook* gives this definition: "Art is

the communication of an experience." So with our painting, the artist views (or imagines) a sunset, and communicates that experience to others through his painting. This is the definition I like best.

Art is the communication of an experience. Take the stage. Why do people go to the theatre? To be moved. Or to be entertained, if you will. How? By sharing an experience. How? By having an experience communicated to them. The function of a work of art is to stimulate in those who behold it feelings similar to those of the artist. This is the principle of empathy. Seldon goes on: "In order to be a good communicator, the actor must first be a good experiencer. He must also be a skillful technician." An artist is first of all a person capable of a keen awareness of life to whom the communication of an experience to others is a joy.

Think of the magicians you admire most. When this essay first appeared I asked the reader to think of Slydini, Dal Vernon, Cardini, Galli-Galli. When these men perform, they are having an experience. They are not just up there saying "Now watch this." They themselves are having an experience and to them the communication of that experience to others is a joy. That is why they are fine artists.

Well, I said I would talk about what makes for good acting. There is a tremendous amount of ground to cover. I am going to limit myself to pointing out what I think are the most important points and lessons the magician can get from the actor. To do this I will take a little time first to describe the modern training of the actor and then relate this to magic.

I mentioned Dariel Fitzkee's book, *Showmanship for Magicians*. This is the first of a trilogy. The second book is called *The Trick Brain* and the third *Magic by Misdirection*, about which he said: "This is the book I have waited many years to write. To do it justice I had to write two complete books before it." *Magic by Misdirection* is a detailed explanation of the psychology of deception as applied to magic. In it he goes into great detail on the subjects of disguise, attention control, dissimulation, interpretation, maneuver, ruse, anticipation, diversion, monotony, premature consummation, confusion, and suggestion. Finally he says, and I quote: "All of these narrow themselves to *convincing acting*." I stress *convincing*.

By convincing acting, of course, we mean good acting, believable acting,

what we call true - "true to life." This, of course, is a changing concept. The idea of what makes for good acting, believable acting, has been changing since theater began. Each great movement of theater - Shakespeare, Moliere, Garrick, The Mannheim Theater, Stanislavsky - all are peaks in the development and constantly changing concept of what we will accept in the theater as good and believable acting. This is an inevitable and healthy change in taste. Even viewing today a movie made only 30 or 40 years ago we can see a fantastic change in what was acceptable and believable in acting. And I have a hunch one of our troubles as magicians is that magic has not kept up with acting and the other performing arts in his respect. Because this change, this development, doesn't "just happen."

So: Just what goes into the training of an actor today? First of all - and here I think is the first important lesson which the magician can get from the actor - is the fact that the actor when he begins his training will do a great deal of self-evaluation by taking stock of his own assets and liabilities, both external and internal.

The externals which he will take stock of are things like his appearance, his build, his features, his posture, his body, the state of his health, his energy; things like grace, control, muscular freedom, flexibility and expressiveness; his voice - the quality of his voice, placement, resonance, breath control, range, projection; his speech - diction, articulation, distracting qualities, accent, localisms, affectations of speech, flexibility.

The internals which he will take stock of are things like his imagination (the ability to visualize and recreate), his sensibility, acuteness of perception, human warmth, emotional responsiveness, dramatic sense, sense of tone and rhythm, sense of conflict and building, sense of proportion, his courage; and finally his intellect, which of course includes the understanding of the whole universe, of man in all his manifestations.

Also, he will do a good deal of psychological self-examination. And this is true whether he is in the drama department of a large university or at a school like The American Academy of Dramatic Arts, or the Neighborhood Playhouse, or with an individual teacher like Harold Clurman or Robert Lewis. This psychological examination consists of examining his own

motives. Why does he want to be an actor? Is it a truly creative impulse, the desire or the joy of communication; or is it a manifestation of ego, exhibitionism, or overcompensation for feelings of inhibition or inadequacy? I sometimes wonder how many magicians ever do any of this kind of self-evaluation.

The bulk of an actor's training can be broken down into two main parts - the training of his external instrument and the training of his internal instrument. These two elements are trained, of course, simultaneously and continually. It is a never-ending process.

The internal instrument includes the powers of his intellect. This embraces all knowledge, particularly human psychology. It includes knowledge of theory, things like the theory of aesthetics, the balance between empathy and aesthetic distance, the so-called "isms," naturalism, expressionism, impressionism, etc. The training of the external instrument involves the development of a versatile, flexible, controlled and responsive outer instrument. To achieve this the actor will study dance, mime, acrobatics, fencing, eurythmics. He will study voice, speech, singing, phonetics, dialect. Formerly these externals were all that were taught.

It is with the training of the internal instrument that in recent times the great advance has been made toward Fitzkee's "convincing acting". The modern training of an actor works with simple, testable principles. Say we start with the realization that physical or muscular tension is the performer's greatest enemy. Tension is misplaced energy. The body under tension not only cannot move or speak properly; it cannot think or feel.

For an actor to appear alive and real, he must really think and feel on the stage. He must not only make believe that he does; he must really do something. And there is where we get back to that definition of Webster's: "To act is to *do*." From a purely craft point of view acting is the ability to respond truthfully to imaginary stimuli. In other words, boiled down, what it amounts to is this: In life we do things, really do things, for *real* reasons. In acting we do things, also really do things, but for *imaginary* reasons. But the *doing* in life and in acting are the same.

When I was teaching acting, I attempted to make as brief as possible an outline of the work of an actor. Here it is:

1. The Actor's Instrument: To act is to do. The actor is the doer. The aim of the actor on the stage is do to things really, for imaginary reasons. The task of the actor is the continual training of those parts of himself which he can use to do this. Those parts of himself which the actor can use to make the imaginary reasons specifically believable to himself we call the actor's inner instrument. They involve his powers of concentration, his powers of relaxation, his powers of imagination, his powers of observation, and his powers of sensory perception. Those parts of himself which the actor can use in executing actions - doing things really - we call the actor's outer instrument. They involve his powers of movement (body) and his powers of speech (voice).

2. Approach to a Role - The Process: Every part in every play is an experience or a series of experiences in the life of a character. The problem of the actor is to become familiar with the experiences he is about to enact. He must discover what the character does in the play and what things in the play do to the character. He must, in other words, become intimately aware of those experiences he is to enact. Once an understanding of this experience has been made specific to the actor, the inducement of the tiniest realities (by action and reaction with and to animate and inanimate objects about him) is the tasks of paramount importance. Only through complete attention to the inducement of these tiniest realities, through specific activity, can the full enactment of the experiences be realized.

All of this of course is a long process and there isn't time to go into great detail. But I am going to run down a list of the kind of things an actor works on in his training to give you some idea of their variety and quantity.

He will do exercises in relaxation and concentration - this cycle which can be either a vicious or a benevolent cycle, because you cannot concentrate unless you are relaxed. He will do exercises in imagination, in observation, in sensory perception, in action; exercises in particularization, which is capturing the essence of a word, a bit of music or a picture and expressing them in terms of his own body; exercises in communication, in external justification, in sense memory. This last is the technique of sensory

recall by which you create the illusion that something exists which isn't really there, just through your actions. An application in magic, for example, is the Phantom Cigarette. He will do exercises in relating to objects. And here again is a very valid application in magic. I think immediately of the many times I have seen magicians working with doves. A little thing that is often done by magicians is when they produce the dove, and before they are about to vanish it, they will kiss it on the head. This can be a very nice thing, with very strong and very good audience empathy if it is done right, if they relate to the object validly. But so many times I see a magician handle the dove roughly and give it a sort of couldn't-care-less peck and then stuff it in the box.

Actors will also do exercises in effective memory, which is the process of recall in order to experience, and there will be exercises in characterization.

All of these exercises will be done first on an individual basis, then done in groups, then in improvisations, then in little scenes, and finally in whole plays. But all of this work, of course, is done under a teacher or director. And here we come to what I think is the second important lesson for the magician from the actor; that the work is done under a teacher or a director.

The great difference, of course, between the actor and the magician has less to do with what they do, really, but the conditions under which they do it. The actor usually is one of a team consisting of producers, directors, other actors, technicians, electricians, choreographers, stage managers and so on. The magician is usually his own author, producer, stage manager and, unfortunately, he usually tries to be his own director.

No one can be subjective and objective at the same time. The use of mirrors by a magician has its place in checking sight-lines, seeing how things look, etc. But it can be pretty devastating, as it can be for an actor, to work too much in front of mirrors. In television there is a very vicious trap in watching yourself on a monitor, and it can be death to an actor. In many studios the directors refuse to have monitors in positions where actors can see them.

What I am saying is that I believe it is very important for a magician, who is after all an actor, to get direction. In my own work I always get help. Fortunately I have friends who are fine directors and who know theater well and are interested in magic, who will do this for me. And I have helped others in the same way. Jimmy Reneaux, when he was preparing his club act, asked me to come and work with him, not on the magic, not on the technical aspects of the tricks, but purely on the acting side, on stage presence, presentation and so on. I do not take any credit for Jimmy's subsequent success, but the point is that he asked someone to do it for him; and I think all magicians should do this. And it is important to get direction early, not after your act is set.

The great acting teacher, Stanislavsky, said: "For every performance an actor gives of the wrong sort, it takes ten performances on the right basis to rid himself of its deleterious effect."

To get on to the next point, I will quote Stanislavsky again. He said: "The actor must believe." (Sound familiar? I can hear Tony Slydini saying "You gotta believe!") Back to Stanislavsky: "The actor must believe. Therefore, he must find the truth within himself. He knows that his aids are lies but he understands that creativeness begins from that moment when in the soul and imagination of the actor there appears the magical creative IF, that is, the imagined truth which the actor can believe as sincerely and with greater enthusiasm than he believes practical truth, just as the child believes in the existence of its doll and all of life in and around it. From the moment of the appearance of the magical IF, the actor passes from the plane of actual reality into the plane of another life, created and imagined by himself. Believing in this life, the actor can begin to create."

Let's talk about this business of belief. When people go to the theater or movies or watch television they suspend disbelief in order to be entertained. When they sit in the theater they know they are not looking at a real room; they know it is just painted scenery up there; they know the actor is not really the character he is portraying. When there is that great fight on stage and somebody is shot and falls dead they know there wasn't a real bullet in that gun; they know the actor is not really dead. They know the delightful guy in that wonderful comedy isn't really married to that

beautiful blonde and that all those wacky things don't really happen to him. BUT - if the actor is good, if he is convincing, if he is an artist, if he himself has an experience; then they, the audience, will have an experience too; and they will accept and enjoy. And gentlemen, I submit that the magician can do the same thing if he will work as hard or harder at being a good actor as he does at mastering the mechanics of tricks.

All right, what are some of the things an actor does that the magician can do to achieve this belief. I mentioned something of the tremendous amount of work that goes into the training of an actor. Ideally the magician (who, remember, is an actor), should do the same. At the very least he should do some work in acting, take some acting lessons, do work in speech, do work in movement, do *some* work with Little Theater groups, Community Theater groups. Don't worry that it is an amateur group. To me the only difference between a professional and an amateur is one of definition - true definition.

The professional is someone who does something to make money; the amateur is someone who does it because he loves it. Neither definition has anything to do with ability or the quality of the work he does. We have all seen performances by amateurs which would do credit to any "pro" and we have also seen professionals who were pretty bad. So work with Little Theater, Community Theater, get into plays.

Next, read books on acting. The next time you have a few bucks and you try to decide which new magic book you will get, invest in a good book on acting instead, or at least get books on acting from the library and read them. I recommend a few books. One is *Producing the Play* by John Gassner. This is a completely reference library in one volume for anyone working in any theatrical medium. And remember, you are your own producer, stage manager, everything; so a book like this is, I feel, of great value. It covers all elements of theatrical production, things like styles of theater, stage and theater building, settings, lights, costumes, scene design, makeup; very fine sections on acting, on character creation, on theater organization, stage management, directing, types of staging, comedy, music. It also includes a section called *The New Scene Technicians Handbook* which covers things like scenery and property construction, materials for

construction, lighting equipment, scene painting, sound effects, patterns for basic costumes.

Two other books by a man named Seldon that I would recommend are *A Players Handbook* and *First Steps in Acting*. These are two good, brief primers of acting. Another good book is called *Common Sense About Acting* by Strong, a clear discussion of organic as opposed to mimetic acting. And I would recommend three books by Stanislavsky, his Trilogy consisting of *My Life in Art*, *An Actor Prepares*, and *Building a Character*.

So much for books. Other things that we should do: To study each other's work, acting wise, from the point of view of performance; not to figure out how the tricks are done or be concerned with the technical aspects of the work, but the work as an actor.

And study other performers actively, performers like Marcel Marceau. Talk about magic! Here is a man from whom any performer - actor, magician, anybody - can learn lessons of the greatest value. This man will make you believe that a rope is there when you know it's not. People like Victor Borge, a brilliant performer. How I would love to see a magician use magic the way Victor Borge uses music. Comedians like Bob Hope. What is it that makes him so great? Anybody who can talk can tell a joke, but that doesn't make him a comedian. And anybody can learn to do a trick but that doesn't make him a magician.

And lastly, and I think this is the final important lesson a magician can get from the actor, is the tremendous amount of time spent in rehearsal. Sure, we all agree we must practice and practice and practice a trick until we have it perfect, but that's not enough. Consummate practice constitutes a fundamental must, and repetition is necessary if the end result is to sink into the mind and remain there as a welcome guest. That's only the beginning, the equivalent of what the actor does to learn his craft: learning to speak and to move properly.

Think of the time spent in preparing a professional production for the stage: 8, 10, 12 hours a day, six days a week, 6, 8, 10 weeks of rehearsals - and rehearsals of the right kind, rehearsals with an aggressive creative mood. It isn't a matter of just seeing things the way you think they should be and then running through them time after time; but rehearsing with this

aggressive creative mood, constantly reexamining, changing, perfecting, polishing, until it is just right.

There are different kinds of rehearsals that can be used by a magician that I think are valuable, such as dry runs, going through your routine or your act, using the equipment but not worrying about the technical aspects of the tricks themselves, just concentrating on performance, on presentation, thinking about the effect on the audience and how they are going to see the trick. Then there are Pantomime Runs. These are done without using the equipment at all, just going through the routine or the act completely in pantomime. Thus you are free to concentrate completely on the presentation and the acting side of the magic.

Another valuable kind of rehearsal that can be used to great benefit (I use it all the time both as actor and magician) is what I call Mental Rehearsals. You can do these any place, any time. Lie down before you go to sleep at night and just mentally go through the act in detail. In this case you are completely free now from performing in any sense and you can concentrate completely. Your mind is free to concentrate on the presentation aspects, to visualize how it is going to look to the audience. And finally, a very important thing which is neglected by many magicians I think, is the careful rehearsal of entrance, exits and bows.

Of course, rehearsals include attention to very important things like stage management, which must be meticulous in the case of a magician, and costuming and grooming - your appearance. And finally all the elements will be together and you will be ready for that final dress rehearsal. I believe no matter how long you have been doing an act or how often you have done it, you should go through a complete dress rehearsal every day previous to doing a performance.

Well, gentlemen, my time is up. I hope this has been of some value and that I may have stimulated you to do some work in acting. You may be surprised at what it will do for you. The least it can do is to give you greater confidence. And the worst enemy of a performer is the sense of not being prepared. Thank you.