

## The Magician is an Actor

by John Tudor ([www.tudormagic.com](http://www.tudormagic.com))

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"Un prestidigitateur n'est point un jongleur; c'est un acteur jouant un rôle de magicien."

The "magician is an actor" phrase is by our generally accepted Father of Modern Magic, Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin. We all know it by heart, cleverly recite it to each other, use it in interviews...it's now referred to as our "prime directive." But what does it mean? Like Coleridge's phrase, "willing suspension of disbelief," "the magician is an actor" has grown a life of its own. It has come to mean much more than Robert-Houdin intended, or would ever have imagined.

"The phrase" (as we will call it) appears in *Secrets of Conjuring and Magic* (1868), published just three years before his death, nine years after his memoirs. Robert-Houdin is discussing terms for conjurors, *escamotage* (from the Arab word for the little cork ball in cup-and-ball routines) and *prestidigitator*. This is a made up word, from *presto-digiti*, meaning fast (or nimble) fingers. Robert-Houdin didn't like either term. In particular, prestidigitation smacked of fast hands, devoid of artistry. This, he said, is what a magician is **not**. There is an imaginative dimension to magic, a pretended illusion, like an actor playing a part of a "real" magician.<sup>1</sup>

A discussion of the exact meanings of the French and English words at various times would be too lengthy for our purposes here. For our discussion, we'll set aside linguistic precision, and pretend this 150 year old phrase generally means what we think it does today.

What's the context? Paris, at the time, was one of the most enlightened cities of the world. Legitimate theater was in the Romantic move-

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ment, and the “well made play” trend, of Sardou and Dumas. Popular entertainment in music halls, ‘penny theatres,’ and the like featured lots of spectacle, magic lantern shows, and phantasmagoria. Electric lighting and other new stage technology was being created. In music (for opera and ballet), the composers Ravel and Liszt were both compared (favorably) to magicians.<sup>2</sup> The popular imagination was ready for compelling artistic spectacles.

It’s in the context of Robert-Houdin’s life that we find the answer. Robert-Houdin was himself an actor! He knew what he was talking about, having done amateur theatricals. It’s right there in the Memoirs, Chapter 8. “Some young friends joined me in forming a light comedy company, and I had the pleasure of performing all the parts in the most fashionable pieces of the day. Our performance was Gratis (free): hence, I need not say we had crowded audiences. Of course, too, we were all wonderful actors - at least that is what people told us so - and our gratified self-love found no cause for refusing their praise.”<sup>3</sup>

“The success of my acting had procured me admission to certain salons where I often spent an agreeable evening; for acting went on here too, in the shape of charades.”<sup>4</sup> As we know, charades is a form of improvisation.

Most anyone who has done a bit of theater can intuitively understand the phrase, and Robert-Houdin’s downplaying of ‘fast hands’ as essential to more artistic conjuring. He may have also been referring to magicians of his day who simply performed and spoke too fast. Robert-Houdin also provides strict rules as to dress, etiquette, furnishings, and diction. His list of spoken word do’s and don’ts outlined the perfect grammatical correctness he demanded.

As to acting, consider this about the performer’s inner technique: “The performer must sufficiently enter into the part he plays, to himself believe in the reality of his fictitious statements. This belief on his own part will infallibly carry a like conviction to the minds of spectators.”<sup>5</sup>

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Those are acting words. I can almost hear Slydini saying “You gotta believe!” In this area, as well as many others, Robert-Houdin really was ahead of his time.

We owe a lot to a contemporary of Robert-Houdin, Angelo John Lewis (Professor Hoffman), for his clear and distinct translation of *Secrets* (1877). There is a certain irony, considering Hoffman’s stated warning that the chapter containing the phrase wasn’t very important. Hoffman claimed it was just details of French words, only included so as not to “mutilate” the original text. He also said he translated the “spirit rather than the letter” of Robert-Houdin’s work, showing a barrister’s judgement.

Hoffman changed ‘prestidigitator’ to ‘conjurer,’ and added another phrase: “one who can do real magic.” The phrase became “A conjurer is not a juggler, he is an actor portraying a magician, one who can do real magic.”<sup>6</sup> Not black magic, as some have tried to suggest (Robert-Houdin was an active anti-spiritualist). Robert-Houdin claimed his “supernatural powers” were allied with science and mechanics, to create his “fictitious magic.” (which of course suggests the existence of non-fictitious, “real” magic) Hoffman expanded Robert-Houdin’s winking occult references to sorcery and the black arts when he added the title “How to be a Wizard.”

What were the reactions? As the general respect for Robert-Houdin’s reputation expanded, the phrase passed into a sort of oral history of magic theory. The magic historian, Henry Ridgely Evans, was one of the first to seize upon the idea’s importance. “A magician should not have a contempt for his calling, but always remember that he is an actor, playing the part of a sorcerer.”<sup>7</sup>

A few years later (1908) John Neville Maskelyne, in *Our Magic*, greatly expands on Robert-Houdin’s phrase. Maskelyne writes “There is only one fault in that (Robert-Houdin’s) statement. He should have said ‘a great conjurer.’ Because, as we all know, there are many conjurers who only play the part of some other conjurer.”<sup>8</sup> They just copy someone else. Sound familiar? Maskelyne also re-phrased the concept, writing that “the modern Magician (is) playing the part of the *legendary* Magician.” He also seems to be the one who came up with “It’s not what you do, as the way you do it.”

Harry Houdini apparently loved the phrase, and used it even after he'd written *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*, the scathing attack on his former hero from whom he took his stage name. A number of authors have refuted Houdini's book, while others questioned Houdini's psychology. After the *The Unmasking*, readers were perhaps more open to question the master.

A young Dai Vernon found the Robert-Houdin books to be essential, and his mentor Dr. Elliott echoed Robert-Houdin's ideas in stressing that he be *natural*. Simplicity, naturalness, and consistency in the role were the main ideas. (Robert-Houdin discussed these as well as the qualities of "self possession, coolness, animation, and dash")<sup>9</sup>

Henning Nelms agreed with the phrase, but felt it was too narrow. The conjuror might play a variety of roles; a magician, a psychic, an escapist, etc. Nelms also brought up the quality of the assistant's role, and the role expected of the audience itself.<sup>10</sup>

When the modern theater was applied to magic, something wonderful happened. Doug Henning and David Copperfield revitalized magic, by being actors in a real sense (though Henning leaned towards musical comedy). The phrase also resonated with our post modern magicians Penn & Teller, who reinvented what that role of a magician is. We owe a lot to Teller's teacher Rosie, who stressed that we remember the "magician is not a juggler" part of the phrase.<sup>11</sup>

In the current era, Robert-Houdin is a cultural hero in France, an object of national pride. Most recently, author Michael Mangan proposed the Social Prestige theory of the phrase, which is very compelling. Mangan states that Robert-Houdin was making a social point, about a new kind of conjuror. Robert-Houdin gave magic its "deed of distinction" (*lettres de noblesse*), transforming a crude fairground amusement into the status of a refined art form, elevating it "from the street to the stage" (*le berceau de la magie moderne*). This view included "a wide range of wonder-exciting performances."<sup>12</sup>

Respectability was Robert-Houdin's motivation, downplaying 'mere' physical skill and focusing on the imaginative aspect. Magic was an art of

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*high* culture, rather than *popular* culture. The modern magician was not a street or public house busker, but a practitioner of a dignified form of legitimate theater.

Robert-Houdin has his detractors, of course. John Booth and others pointed out his contradictions. Mixed with his high ideals, Robert-Houdin referred to himself as a prestidigitator! He also said the three most important things are “dexterity, dexterity, and dexterity!” Fast hands indeed.

Author Graham Jones claimed that Robert-Houdin froze us in his era and style of white tie and tails, as well as his mode of performance.<sup>13</sup> While we were frozen that way for a century, I’m not sure Robert-Houdin is to blame.

Roberto Giobbi actually claimed that the study of acting somehow hurts magic, or hinders the magic technique.

A most persistent dispute is the “natural personality” vs “acting technique” dichotomy. Aldo Columbini was quite vocal on this - that his performances were “just me,” no acting was ever involved.

This seems an ill-informed and rigid idea of what acting is, especially since there are seldom clear lines of separation. It’s sticky, because a magician can use more than one mode at a time, and shift between them during the performance. Fred Keating, a magician and trained actor, put the whole thing to bed when he wrote “Acting and personality are so closely interrelated that, for practical purposes, they are almost one and the same thing.”<sup>14</sup> An old saying goes that “Good acting allows you to create a character; a good character allows you to be yourself.”

Performance theorist, Michael Kirby, postulated five levels of performance.<sup>15</sup> 1.) The lowest are the black clad stagehands, who we’re sometimes allowed to see moving props or working puppets. We generally learn to ignore and forget about them. 2.) The next level we know as the chorus or extras, who always refer to the lead characters. Most magic assistants fall into this category. 3.) Next we have the featured players, who do what Kirby calls “received acting.” They have lines, etc. but still always refer back to the main characters. Pam Thompson is the best example. 4.) Then comes “simple acting,” of simulation and impersonation, but still requiring con-

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viction and belief. 5.) Highest of all is “complex acting,” where the deep inner emotions and nature of a character may be revealed.

“Simple acting” is what magicians do, and what Robert-Houdin was referring to, because that is what “acting” meant in the era (1868) when he wrote those words. It was more about stylized gestures and one dimensional characters than deep or realistic portrayals. A slow evolution towards naturalness and realism occurred over some decades, in the Modernist and Naturalist theatre movements. The most realistic style, that we know as “Method acting” made its way from the Moscow Art Theater to the Group Theater in New York and the Actor’s Laboratory in Hollywood, in the 1930’s.

Still, many aspects of method acting are found in magic performance. My mentor was Coe Norton, a highly trained stage and TV actor, and professor of drama. Here are some of his ideas.

Coe said the main difference between the actor and the magician is that the actor plays many roles, the magician usually just one, the “magic man.” In modern acting, the characterization is really ones self, under conditions (age, background, education, etc.) imposed by the author. In magic, the characterization is also oneself, under conditions imposed by the performer himself. Also actors usually have a director, whereas magicians tend to self-direct.

Coe liked the definition of art as the “communication of an experience.” Good magicians can powerfully and convincingly convey their experience, using the modern methods of acting. Coe reiterated that the actor/magician must believe, and believe so strongly that the belief is conveyed to the audience. This allows them to believe as well, which is a joyous thing to the audience (think of Doug Henning).

The actor’s work involves training the actor’s “instrument.” The outer instrument, is the body, the voice, the breath, etc. The inner instrument is our concentration, relaxation, imagination, etc. Stanislavsky created the “Magic If.” We might say, “I have no magic powers, but if I did, what would it be like?” Method acting applied to magic means technical mastery

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of the outer instrument, while the inner instrument's work makes it convincing.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, it's possible to be a great magician for a lifetime without being aware of all this. I will submit that this acting process is what all good magicians do. As Stanislavsky said about his own system, "If it works for you, use it. If it doesn't, don't!"

The following was found in a post on the Magic Cafe, of all places, by mtpascoe. "If that's so (the magician is an actor), then the discovery by modern magicians (of new meanings within that phrase) is a happy accident. It has changed the lives of so many magicians that took it literally."<sup>17</sup> Robert-Houdin's "magician is an actor" concept has allowed several generations of magicians to be able to reinvent themselves. It's an idea that is simply good for us as magicians, individually; and good for magic as a whole.

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#### Footnotes

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