

DIGITAL PHOTOS: JOHN MOHRING

The Professor, the legendary Dai Vernon (1894-1992), once stated: “We’re in an opportune age of magic, a time when a clever magician could make a living working for magicians for at least 100 years.”

Michael Ammar, born in 1956, has been successfully marketing magic to his fellow magicians for well-over half of his life. Almost concurrent with his early years of learning how to do magic, he began teaching others, not only how magic worked, but why it worked. Through his college years in West Virginia, Michael performed close-up magic at trade shows, then started doing conventions across the country. His highly acclaimed performances would eventually lead to two appearances on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson.

By 1983, Michael became the youngest person ever to be awarded the Academy of Magical Arts (Magic Castle) “Lecturer of the Year” title. He not only won it again the following year, but was also voted “Close-up Magician of the Year.” During the ’80s, Michael streamlined the magic lecture tour and developed his exclusive workshop method of teaching magic and magic theory. Along the way, he published numerous magic books, produced racks-full of instructional videotapes, and originated and promoted an ever-changing line of dealer items. Michael Ammar is recognized as perhaps the most versatile marketer of close-up magic instruction today.

However, even though Michael’s books and videos are a mainstay in just about every magic shop and dealer catalog, there’s been a noticeable absence of his presence on the lecture circuit for the last year and a half. He’s settled down with his wife Hannah in a new home in Las Vegas and has been extremely busy performing as one of the “resident” close-up workers at Caesars Magical Empire.

STAN ALLEN contacted Michael to find out just exactly what the magician’s magician — who has literally gone underground to work for lay people — is really up to.

MICHAEL AMMAR

I N H I S W O R D S

MAGIC: Weren’t you bitten by the magic bug at a little later date than most?

AMMAR: I was 17 years old — and I don’t think it was a normal interest in magic. It went from being aware of it to being totally obsessed with it. A guy in study hall showed me a couple of tricks. It wasn’t so much that they were great tricks, it was the fact that this guy could do these things, and something like magic could be learned. Everything changed. The next day I checked out all the magic books in the library.

MAGIC: Is it true that you actually practiced magic during class while in school?

AMMAR: Absolutely. During my college years, my waking thoughts always centered on magic. I took relatively light semesters so that I could focus on what I enjoyed doing.

MAGIC: It sounds like you were intent on becoming a magician before you earned a college degree.

AMMAR: I believed it was possible to get 20 years of experience without taking 20 years to do it. I figured out ways to practice as I did other things. I

felt there were ways to compress experience, to learn as much as possible by completely eliminating sidetracking and focusing only on what I was trying to learn. I developed a series of practice objectives — a check list after every rehearsal and every practice session — to see if I was staying on target.

MAGIC: Did you feel that you were trying to catch up because of the late start in magic?

AMMAR: It wasn't so much that. It seemed to me if you're going to do something, you do it with all your might.

MAGIC: Were you always of this positive nature?

AMMAR: The real revelation came in high school, listening to a set of motivational audiotapes by Earl Nightingale. The tapes became a blueprint for getting through my first few years as a professional magician. Work hard and you can really do anything you want, as long as you put the effort into it. These inspirational tapes were in perfect agreement with the "cause and effect" law on which everything in the universe operates.

MAGIC: Had you already decided that you were going to be a professional magician?

AMMAR: At the time, I was doing college for somebody else — my parents wanted me to finish school. By default I learned some business and some psychology. Had I realized I was going to be a magician for a living, I would have taken some theater and other classes that would have put a different tangent on my career direction.

MAGIC: Why the early focus on close-up magic?

AMMAR: It was due to Irv Weiner, and I doubt that he realizes the influence he had on me at this time. He came through West Virginia working colleges and, stylistically, he was doing exactly what I wanted to do. Doug Henning had just done a big show at West Virginia University with a lot of people in his show. But when Irv Weiner walked out with so few props, he was really the magician. A really clever guy, who got tremendous applause with the "Torn and Restored Cigarette Paper." It seemed to me if you could learn to do that kind of

magic, you could later do illusions if you wanted to.

MAGIC: So you start working your way through college as a professional magician. When did you start teaching close-up magic?

AMMAR: The very first lecture was in Chillicothe, Ohio. I had done a Columbus Magi-Fest, and the local club there asked me to put together a lecture.

MAGIC: You're still in college, learning magic, performing it, teaching it and you're even writing about magic.

AMMAR: Yes. The first thing I wrote while at WVU was the *Manual of Magic Psychology*. My minor was psychology, and I would always take enough magic to class to practice my way through whatever the length of the class might be. I'd be practicing magic, and the teacher

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would be talking about psychology, and every now and then, it would strike a chord. I really wrote that essay for myself. It forced me to articulate ideas and come to an understanding that writing is just like teaching. It's the best way to learn.

MAGIC: When did the interest in marketing your magic start?

AMMAR: Business management was my major at college. Performing in a small town in West Virginia — my marketplace — it became clear that show business was two words. There's not going to be any show, if you don't have any business. The other thing that struck me growing up in a small town: you've got to have the repeat business. If you're into it for the quick buck, if your products don't weigh out, and there is no repeat factor, it's going to be a short career.

MAGIC: When did the teaching start to overshadow the performing?

AMMAR: Again, I was influenced by listening to an Earl Nightingale audiotape. He told a true story, which he called "Acres of Diamonds," about a man who sold his farm to finance a worldwide search for diamonds. Without realizing that his

own property contained the richest diamond mine anywhere, he sold the farm. He didn't even think to look in his own backyard. This made me think and ask myself: Is it really possible that doing what I get great joy doing, performing and teaching magic, might be able to support me? Around that time I started to get requests to do lectures at magic conventions, and I said why not play on these strong links and eliminate the weaker links. Start doing those things that I don't have to beat the bush for.

MAGIC: When did you realize there were other places to do magic lectures other than magic conventions?

AMMAR: After a successful European tour and after Arnold Furst took me to Japan to lecture, I realized that there are magic clubs in every city on the planet. Suddenly I saw that magic is a global marketplace. All I needed to do was become recognized in this field, then the world was conceivably my backyard.

MAGIC: What did you do to help gain more name recognition among magicians?

AMMAR: Well, there was the win at FISM in 1982. That certainly helped. I knew close-up magic was a very targeted marketplace, and there were only two or three printed sources that I needed to get into to become more recognized. The "Magic Management Series" in *Genii* and the "Back to Basics" column for *Magic Manuscript* were done specifically for that reason.

MAGIC: Did you start a business plan with specific goals?

AMMAR: The first thing I did was determine how many lectures could be done. I got a map and made a list with every name and address possible for a magic lecture: the rings, assemblies and clubs, the shops, any other possible sponsors. I had this list of 400 contacts, and it became obvious to break it down into regions.

MAGIC: Didn't you devise a system for making the travel profitable?

AMMAR: Magicians were asking me to do a lecture over here, then fly over there to do another. My whole fee was paying for that flight. I realized I had to get organized. The key was to work regions densely. For example, if you wanted to work the New York area, don't just work

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one city. In three weeks you do 18 lectures in the area — the other 17 become the profit.

MAGIC: But how did you get all the clubs and sponsors within a region to book lectures that close together?

AMMAR: Concentrated scheduling was the key factor that I brought to the United States magic lecture circuit. When I went to Europe, they realized that an American is coming over, and he doesn't have the time to stay around for all of the monthly meeting nights. The cities in Europe would reschedule or make special meeting nights according to my availability. If they couldn't book you while you were there for, say, those 21 days, they would miss out. Once Americans entered into that frame of mind, the concept of working regions densely was obviously the only way to go.

MAGIC: Doesn't a lecturer need that "name recognition" built up before you can do this?

AMMAR: Absolutely. If you are in demand, and they know that you're coming their way, then you can say, "Don't tell me when your meeting date is. Just tell me 'yes' or 'no,' and I'll tell you what date I can be there."

MAGIC: Once you've covered a region, how long before you can come back?

AMMAR: I feel comfortable with three years. If you've worked a region densely, then you don't have to come back for that long. However, it must be treated like a business. If I don't go every three years — say, I wait six years — I missed the opportunity three years ago and left money on the table.

MAGIC: How did you turn lecture notes into a valuable teaching tool?

AMMAR: In the beginning, most printed notes were just a cue sheet, a summary of the things talked about. They were mimeographed, usually sold for \$5, and basically didn't teach anything. However, once there's the volume generated by working the regions densely, you can afford to put out a great set of notes, like my *Command Performance* booklets were early on. Because they were typeset, illustrated, and explained everything, you could expect to sell them for more.

MAGIC: Besides starting to sell your books at lectures, like the *Encore* books and the *Topit Book*, were there other items merchandised?

AMMAR: Yes, if approached in the right way, at the end of a lecture, I could say, "Here's something that's not in the lecture. Do you mind if I show you?" As a sort of bonus, I demonstrated a few effects that my friends produced and then sold them. As long as the item was something I liked and there was the conviction that the item was really good, I could sell them and it would be considered a service. You would come home with the extra dollars, but then 60% of it would be given to somebody else. After a while it became clear that, if I produced some things, I could make much more than 40% of the money being taken.

MAGIC: And the private sessions proved successful?

AMMAR: The key was scheduling these workshops 90 minutes before the lecture itself started. It's the personal one-on-one time for groups of at least six, no more than twelve. The secret was making the intense workshop take the place of the free sessions that inevitably happen and run late into the night. Without the structure of the private workshop, it's so tempting to give the stuff away.

MAGIC: Are you a creative person?

AMMAR: I don't see myself as an inventor who can sit down and come up with five utterly new concepts. My thinking needs a starting point. If I see something with potential, I build, expand or simplify, as needed. I feel I have the ability to look at magic, see the core, tap into the core factor and perceive the most effective way to explain it to somebody else.

MAGIC: Are you teaching more than just methods?

AMMAR: All along, I had an instinctive realization that magic is about people and it's not about what I am able to do. It's about what I'm able to make them believe. So, if I'm teaching a move, no magic is really happening. I'm just doing moves. Magic is something that happens inside the mind. You've made them accept a false premise: the hand does have a coin in it. Magic is not about suspending disbelief. If you take away belief then you take away all potential for astonishment. If they don't really believe the coin is there, then nothing happened when the hand is empty.

MAGIC: Are your lectures that are heavy on the psychology of magic well-received?

AMMAR: More so over the last six or seven years. I don't know if these lectures are

more successful because I'm loosing my hair and I look like I might know something, or it's because there's a growing number of magicians with technical foundations who realize that the best way to separate themselves from those who know *how* to do something, is to know *why* it's done.

MAGIC: But doesn't the percentage of magicians who want to know *how* new tricks work outweigh those who want to know *why* the tricks they already know work?

AMMAR: Tricks are the most obvious part of magic, the same way the limbs and the

text. I explain a psychological point in a particular routine, by saying, "Here is something I want to talk about, and it's something that you might be able to transfer to other magic that you do." It is made more palatable this way.

MAGIC: Since the early '80s, you have done many tutorial tapes. How effective is video for teaching both the how and why of magic?

AMMAR: When I started doing instructional videos I felt that it was a medium that had not been utilized in the right way. It was being used by default by magicians who felt they couldn't explain tricks ade-

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until just recently, always sounded like
something to be avoided.*

leaves are the obvious part of the tree. But there are root issues and fundamentals that are far more important than those tricks.

MAGIC: What about the 1983 SAM convention, when you were the big featured lecturer? You walked into the packed room and didn't do any tricks. How was that received?

AMMAR: It connected with some people, but at the same time it was never asked to be done again. And I have yet to have a magic club call me up and ask for a lecture without tricks. In those early days, it was clear they wanted to see the tricks and were not too interested in hearing too much about fundamentals.

MAGIC: What have you done to convince the marketplace that this psychology of magic is now important.

AMMAR: With the explosion of the "how to" information that has taken place, the job of the marketer is to make this "why it's done" information more compelling and important, as opposed to creating a supply of more new tricks. Again, it's selling that point: the way to become a better magician and distinguish yourself from those who just know the "how" is to learn the "why."

MAGIC: How do you teach magic theory?

AMMAR: It's piecemeal. The best way for it to sink in is to sliver it up within a lecture. I don't just talk theory without connecting it to a specific effect. Theory has to be put into direct performance con-

text. They were taking technically demanding things and doing rambling explanations, just talking about it.

MAGIC: Video is a linear process, unlike a book where instructions can be skimmed over or skipped or selectively re-read. Have you discovered a way to overcome this?

AMMAR: The instructional information must be scripted. There must be an inspirational performance, with an explanation of why something works and the thinking behind it. The teaching of the technical aspects must be done with close-ups, and provide the performer's view of what is taking place. This material must be shot as concisely as possible, and the last thing you want to do is ramble. The *Classic Renditions* series utilized the "super-learning" re-cap technique, effective editing to Baroque music, and when required, superimposition of information tips on the screen.

MAGIC: Do you see the CD-ROM having any advantages over video as a teaching medium?

AMMAR: Magic can be fully expressed on video. The only thing that CD-ROM gives is non-linear access to the information, but if I do my job effectively on video, that is not an important thing. The ideal combination for teaching magic is an integration of print and video.

MAGIC: Should a close-up act be structured?

AMMAR: To have an act, say a set 12 minutes, until just recently, always sounded

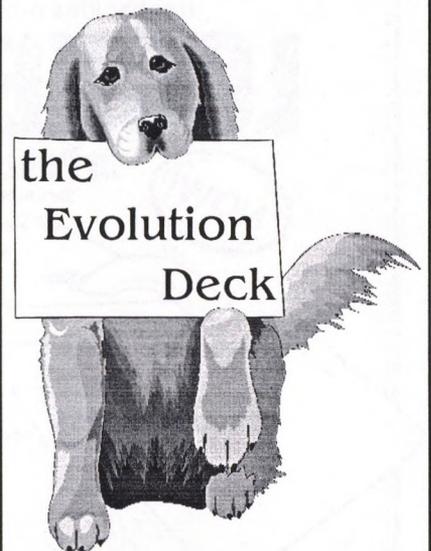
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like something to be avoided. Early in my career the idea of getting an act, and doing that act from now on, scared me to death. Only in the context of working at Caesars Magical Empire — with literally hundreds upon hundreds of performances in eight of the last twelve months — do I feel that I'm closing in on an act, as opposed to a repertoire.

MAGIC: Why? Don't you make more money working for magicians?

AMMAR: With the lectures and teaching I can make in a day what I make in a week

at Caesars Magical Empire. But, I'm at a point where I want to stop teaching for a while — perform an act a thousand times, night after night — and develop and test new material.

MAGIC: Is working at Caesars sort of like being in the trenches?

AMMAR: In a sense it's going back to magic college to either confirm or deny certain thoughts about performance. Except for the recent IBM lecture, I haven't been teaching for the last year and a half.

Because of the demanding marketplace, I need to explore all these new things — play with new tricks. Today I learned three new card tricks. Most magicians couldn't indulge themselves that way. I'm getting paid for what I used to do for nothing. Caesars has turned into a rare learning experience and an opportunity to work six times a night finding out what works and, more important, why it works.

MAGIC: What direction do you see close-up magic taking?

AMMAR: Close-up has developed into a growing marketplace of its own. It's difficult to predict where it is going because we're not dealing with a cycle. It's really more of a bubble that stands a chance of busting. I don't know. I know that the popularity of close-up is providing a lot of people with the role models they would need to take an interest in magic.

MAGIC: Does this expanding interest in close-up forecast a growth in the lecture business?

AMMAR: There are definitely more people wanting to do magic of the close-up kind. Consequently, there are more guys lecturing than ever before. It's solidifying as a crowded marketplace.

MAGIC: How do your ongoing career plans figure into this crowded marketplace of magicians feeding off of magicians?

AMMAR: A career is like going fishing. You put bait in the water, and you see what strikes.

MAGIC: All right, how many lines does Michael Ammar have in the water?

AMMAR: As far as future projects, there are at least a dozen video projects and a half-dozen more audiotapes on the psychology of magic. There are lots of publishing options, television projects and, of course, the lectures and workshops, those one-on-one experiences that bring a lot of personal satisfaction. There's even a performance-only situation — a one man show consideration — that's being nurtured. So, lots of lines with lots of different baits out there.

And there's a thing that growing up in West Virginia did teach me. You can't wait by the phone for that call, "Are you busy? Do you have time to do something for us?" It's never going to happen. Because the whole idea of marketing implies a proactive approach, taking somebody recognizable with something in demand — to the marketplace. ♦

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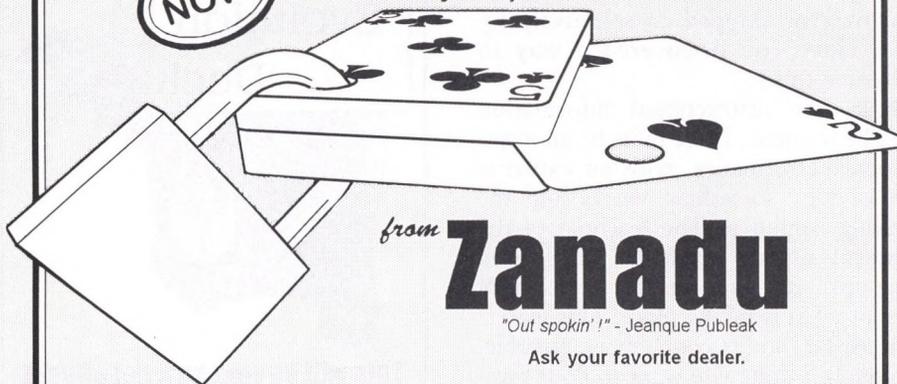
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