

A World Without Magic

Have you watched, recently, the bewilderment on the face of a child and the expressions of their parents when the kid opens both hands to reveal *two* red sponge balls instead of the one they think you just put in their hands? The trick is over! You can drag it out to an explosion of sponge balls—or bunnies, for that matter, but it will never be any more powerful than the revelation of just those first two sponges in the initial transposition.

The same thing happened this past weekend for a young seven-year old girl when she witnessed the first penetration of one Chinese ring through another. She just withered in the shock and disbelief of it all. “No way!” she cried, shaking all over, looking around to her young friends for some relief.

The trick was over! It wasn’t going to get any better than that. I should have just stopped. She had just witnessed the impossible, and she couldn’t stand it. Most of the parents sitting on the couches just behind the kids on the floor shared in the child’s incredulity. The room broke up in spontaneous laughter.

Magic takes the lay audience to that razor-thin edge between what is possible—hence, their expectations, and the impossible—beyond what all their previous collective experience will permit as possible.



A world without magic would be like a language without poetry, not because poetry is just “pretty,” but because poetry is the richest expression we have in any language, the only mechanism—in lay persons’ experience—that can point to what might lie just beyond the concept of the word “the.” That’s what makes magical entertainment so rich.

Think about it with me for a moment. I ask my college literature students in my introduction to poetry to think of “a” person in their lives—just anyone, someone from their work stations, their clubs or organizations, their places of worship, of course, from their families. Then, I ask them to think of “the” person in their lives right now. And then, try to imagine just how grey their lives would be if they could no longer distinguish between “a” person in their lives and “the” person in their lives. It would be like a sunset in black and white, a rose without a fragrance, the pasty taste of paper with every sip of a fine, vintage wine.

But, conceptually—stay with me here—try to project now, what lies beyond “*the*”?

Poetry is the only expression we have in language that has the possibility to point to what lies beyond “the.” To point to that definition which lies beyond what can be known, that amorphous “something” that lurks over the edge, that shadowy alleyway that waits just around the corner of all past human experience. Just trying to imagine that “otherness” stretches all credulity.

And that is the gift we can give—or should strive to give—to our audiences each time in their experiences of our magic. Of course, it doesn’t always happen; audiences have to be receptive, wittingly or unwittingly, to the possibility of such experience, and, as performers, we ourselves must approach our relationship with our spectators in an attitude of giving. Certainly, there are many factors that often block our audience’s receptivity, but when that literally incredible moment happens, most audiences respond to the truly “wonderful” experience with both awe and gratitude. For a few precious moments, we have loosened the restraints in their minds from anything remotely predictable, expected, or reasonable, and we have taken them to the very edge of the “other side.”

I suspect what that “otherness” is that lies just beyond “the” is the experience of pure unity for which there is no language to describe or explain. Some say it is the experience of the mystic, drawn into union with the sublime. Approaching his own impending death in the summer of 2017, Eugene Burger embraced the discovery of the final “Mystery” that we all must come to accept. If “magic is about life,” as Eugene so often proclaimed, then magic, in its effect, parallels the capacities of poetry to lift us beyond expectations and to all but tip us over to the other side.

Hopefully, for the youngsters—so full of life and growing expectations—the experience of the “wonder” triggered by our magical linking rings or exploding, multiplying sponge bunnies they will remember as rubrics or “pointers” to a life full of wondrous and infinite possibilities.

Just sayin’

Doc Grimes