

David



Williamson

He can't even
stay in the lines.

By Mike Caveney

That photograph of David coloring his magic books tells it all. It's not that he looks like a little kid with his Dr. Seuss books spread out on his bedroom floor. It's not even that he is defacing the time-honored drawings of the *Tarbell Course*. Look closer. The putz can't even stay in the lines.



ROOTS...



David Williamson was raised in Xenia, Ohio. The nearest magic club was an hour away. There were no magic shops in the area. As a youth, he obtained a copy of Henry Hay's *Amateur Magicians Handbook*. He studied close-up magic very seriously and performed very serious close-up magic.

Guiding light or magical inspiration: none.

David insists he wasn't a dork in school, preferring the term "loner."

First job was at age 15 working with a team of belly-dancers in road-side lounges along Interstate 75. David was dressed like a genie and table-hopped while the dancers were on break. His mom drove him each night, then waited around until he got off work at 11:00 pm and drove him home. David earned gas money. His mom met many interesting people.

David followed his high school sweetheart, Marsha Casdorpf, to Wright State University in Ohio, where he studied Art. At the age of 20, he married Ms. Casdorpf. Marsha stayed in school eventually earning a B.A. degree in English while David quit school to become a magician. For a year he worked seven nights a week in a Greek restaurant washing dishes.

Finally he got a job as the house magician in a dinner theater. For four years he supported his wife by working as a professional magician performing close-up, table-side magic for diners. He wore a tuxedo and did beautiful sleight of hand for appreciative laymen.

Dave hated it and nearly quit magic.



This guy has been seriously out of line for as long as I have known him. Example: At the IBM convention in Baltimore this summer, Dave was working the comedy club show. Announcing that he needed the assistance of a youngster from the audience, he darted into the crowd looking for just the right volunteer. After an extended search, he snatched from the arms of a stunned mother a newborn baby and carried him (her?) up onto the stage. He carried the baby like you might carry a soggy bag of jello that was about to split open. He set the infant at his feet; his six-foot, six-inch frame towering over it.

After the show I said, "Are you nuts? You can't grab a baby out of a mother's arms. What if that lady had been nursing her baby? You could have had two irate people on your hands."

The next day I went back to the show to see if the baby gag was a regular part of David's act. It wasn't. On this occasion, he performed his Shorts Changed routine where the underwear on two young boys is signed with a laundry marker and the pants magically change places while the kids are wearing them. During the performance, David lifted the boys up off the floor using his knee, flailed them around behind a Spirit Seance Cloth and finally bounced them off the floor.

After the show I said, "Are you nuts? You were throwing those kids around like they were vent dummies. I'm surprised the parents didn't come back and pop you one."

David said, "Well, nobody got hurt."

"That's your definition of a successful show?" I asked. "When no one from the audience is seriously injured or maimed!"

Now it's a week later and we are at the FISM con-

vention in Lausanne, Switzerland. David will perform his final two close-up shows on this night. He enters with a huge cardboard box overflowing with wadded-up newspaper and plastic bubble-wrap. Digging down into this box, he fishes out his props and manages to scatter packing material all over the hall. At the end of the performance, he throws all of his props and most of the rubbish back into the box. Then, he picks up the little girl who had helped with the Cups and Balls, dumps her into the box and drags it into the wings. The audience was laughing hysterically. I couldn't tell if the little girl was laughing. Her face was obscured by plastic bubble-wrap.

After the show I gave David a look which he knew meant, "Are you nuts?" I told David that the cleaning people at the convention center had asked that he not throw so much trash around. (The previous night he had emptied a trash can during his act.) He muttered something about stifling his artistic freedom and headed off behind the curtain to set up for his last show. I feared the worst as I climbed up into the stands for what would be the final close-up performance at the most prestigious magicians' convention on earth.

As David was announced, he burst through the curtain wheeling a huge trash dumpster. He climbed up onto the edge of it in an attempt to reach his props and promptly fell in. Bags of garbage were flying out in every direction. His head popped up just long enough for us to see him pour a few drops of warm soda from a discarded Coke can into his mouth. The line of good taste that he had crossed the previous evening was no longer even in sight. The audience was screaming with laughter.

Something happened in that hall in Switzerland. Those people saw some world-class magicians that evening, but it was the image of that man dressed in



Are you nuts? You can't grab a baby out of a mother's arms.



a business suit crawling around in a garbage bin that they would carry away with them.

Recently, I spoke with David about why he does what he does. I traced his lunacy back to his days as a tuxedo-clad, table-hopping, close-up magician at the Hayloft Dinner Theater in Manassas, Virginia. He was doing the same tricks in the same place to the same reactions every night. The people watched his hands, were suitably amazed and then had another bite of mashed potatoes. David was bored. The customers were enjoying themselves because David is a very skillful magician, but David wasn't having any fun. He decided that he either had to pull the plug and quit, or start having some fun.

The next night, David did a few tricks and then crawled under the table. He collected a few stray shoes and stuffed them into a lady's purse. The people laughed at their shoeless friends and waited to see what this crazy magician would do next as he moved around the room. The people were having a great time and for the first time in a long time, so was David. He now looked at each new table as an adventure. Another chance to do something memorable. It might be a magic trick or it might be pouring a glass of water over his head to cool off.

The dinner theater was empty on Saturday afternoons so the cast decided to write and stage a kiddie show with songs and stories. On Friday nights, David and Marsha could be found in the theater kitchen making 300 sandwiches. On Saturday afternoons, David and a clown were in charge of seating and feeding the kids. With his new outlook on performing, the gags started as soon as the kids entered the theater. Ten kids wearing ten giant chef hats helped distribute the food. Then David and the clown, each armed with a garbage bag, would have a contest to see who could

pick up the most trash from the kids. When it became clear that David was losing, he would steal trash out of the clown's bag and the kids were quick to condemn his actions at the top of their lungs. David thrived in this environment where "anything goes." It turned out to be a graduate course in improvisational theater. After the show, all the kids could talk about was the funny clown and the crazy food-guy and the place was packed every Saturday.

The lessons that David learned at that dinner theater, along with the help and encouragement he received from his friend John Ekin, slowly evolved into a personal performing philosophy. Today, David says he can't imagine doing routines the same way, every time. If he were forced to adhere to a script during each performance he would, quite simply, change careers. David's greatest fear, the thing that would depress him most, is boring people. If an audience member were to look at his watch during David's act, it would kill him. He would rather have an audience boo him than have them yawn.

He believes that if a card is chosen, the audience doesn't really care if you find it or not. They hope you do but if you don't, it's no big deal. So in order to command their attention, you need to create conflict. For instance, if you are introduced and it's obvious that you're not ready, the audience is going to watch closely to see how you handle the situation. If you walk out with a big piece of paper stuck to your shoe, the audience wants to see how you react to it. If you pick a spectator who doesn't speak English, they are anxious to see how you handle it, how you resolve the conflict. These are the points of departure; the moment when the audience believes you are leaving your planned show and heading into unexplored territory. At this point, anything is liable to hap-



Easter Egg Roll at The White House, 1989.



Williamson in "Arsenic & Old Lace." (Williamson is the one without the hat.)



ENTER... MAGIC COLORING CONTEST

- 1st Prize** - A free copy of Dave Williamson's *Sleight of Dave* video.
2nd Prize - Two free copies of Dave Williamson's *Sleight of Dave* video.
3rd Prize - There is no 3rd Prize.

To enter, color the official outline of our guy Dave (photocopies are acceptable). Use only crayons (trying to stay inside the lines). Entries must be received at the M A G I C offices no later than November 1, 1991. Void where prohibited by law or good taste.

Judges: David Williamson, Dave Williamson, D. Williamson, Mr. Williamson, and Sir Williamson. The decision of the judges is final.

All entries become the sole property of M A G I C. Winners will be announced in the December issue of M A G I C.



pen. For most performers, any of the above situations could spell disaster and my advice is to avoid them. But when your name is David Williamson, this is the moment that separates his performance from everyone else's.

For example: Most close-up magicians carry a pack of cards in their pocket. When asked to perform, they remove the cards and have one selected. David carries a deck too. But when asked to perform, he might palm the deck, walk to the nearest waste basket and apparently dig one out of the trash. After the trick, he might toss the cards back into the trash can and leave. The spectators witnessed not only a remarkable card trick, but two other sights that they aren't likely to forget. Next time he is asked, Dave might palm the deck, grab a spectator and shake him upside-down until a deck apparently falls from the guy's pocket. And the time after that... who knows.

The point is that he is taking a chance, going out on a limb. People understand when a personalized performance was created especially for them. OK, a few people will say, "This guy is an idiot," but the majority will show their appreciation with laughter and applause. And none of them will be bored.

I asked David if he embarrassed Marsha at least once a day and he was quick to answer in the affirmative. Then I asked if Marsha ever thought he went too far in his shows. "On the contrary," he said. Most wives get mad if their husbands are late getting home from work or forget to pick up the milk. Marsha gets upset if David does a regular show without taking any chances. She regularly accuses him of not going far enough. That's right... not far enough.

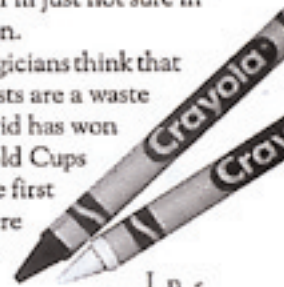
Just about the time this magazine is being delivered to you, Marsha will be delivering a baby into the Williamson family. Yes, a tiny baby created by David and

Marsha Williamson. In years to come, I am certain we will be reading about this child in the newspapers, I'm just not sure in which section.

Many magicians think that magic contests are a waste of time. David has won the IBM Gold Cups (in 1981, the first time they were awarded) as well as the International Magic Award. (Although no award nor check was ever delivered. Probably still in the mail.) David feels that the actual awards are good for the ego but otherwise, worthless (and in one case, literally worthless). Still, he feels that contests are well worth entering. He says that most of the work he gets today, both in and out of magic, is a result of being seen at conventions. Plus, nearly every friend he has in magic is someone he met following a magic convention contest or performance. For that reason alone, he will be forever thankful to conventions for giving him the chance to show off his stuff.

I also asked David if all of those years of practice were really necessary since he uses only a tiny percentage of his sleight-of-hand skills in a performance. He feels that a large arsenal of moves gives him the confidence to challenge any situation that might present itself. And when you work the way David does, every situation imaginable will present itself eventually.

I have to confess that I was a little apprehensive about discussing David Williamson's philosophy in a magic magazine. How many people will read this and say, "Hurrah, no more structured magic. I just have to wing it and be an idiot." That could prove disastrous. If Robin Williams is reading this magazine, OK, you can safely cross that line. For the rest of us, this is very dangerous territory. I'm not saying you should be afraid to ad-lib when the situation presents itself; but



spending four minutes off on a tangent, desperately searching for a laugh, is a sure way for your performance to end up in the dumpster next to David's props. My advice is, rather than trying to copy David Williamson, we should all just sit back and enjoy him whenever we have the chance and hope he doesn't hurt anyone. ●

Well,
no-
body
got
hurt.

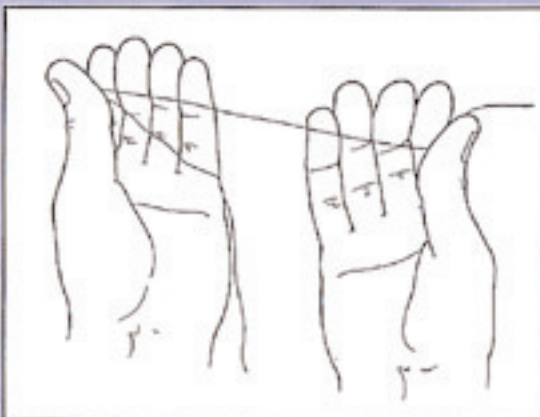


David Williamson's

Chilly Willy's Gypsy Thread Repeat

Written & Illustrated
By Richard Kaufman

One of Williamson's working routines is the Torn and Restored Thread. He often includes a quick repeat when he feels the audience is listening. He uses a spool of white cotton basting thread. At the end of Gypsy Thread he stands



there with a goofy grin on his face hoping the audience will respond. He is left holding the three-foot-long piece of thread, just restored. He launches into some inane chatter (that has nothing to do with anything that is going on). While blabbering, he nervously breaks the thread into a dozen or so pieces—the audience clearly sees and hears the thread being broken. With no switches (and, in fact, no prior preparation), the thread is instantly restored.

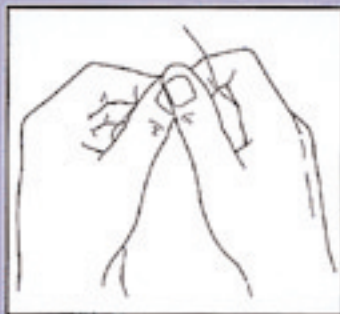
David holds the thread between his right thumb and first finger with about an inch and a half protruding upward; the rest of the thread hangs freely down. His left hand grasps the thread between thumb and first finger about six inches below the right thumb and first finger. Both hands turn palm up so the

thread is stretched horizontally between them, and is taut. This naturally doubles over the portion of thread lying in the left hand. Extend the second, third, and little fingers of both hands (fig. 1).

Curl the fingers around the thread and bring your hands together so the first fingertips and thumbs touch (fig. 2). The hands

must be turned toward each other in order to do this. Wedge the left corner of the right first fingernail beneath the right corner of the left thumbnail.

The right thumb presses gently on the left thumbnail for added leverage. Simultaneously turn both hands palm up as if breaking the thread, moving them a few inches apart—the right first and left thumbnails click off each other, producing a loud snap. This gives the spectators the strong impression that the thread has been broken, however, this is immediately followed by a visual convincer to clinch it. As the hands are brought together again (fingertips and thumbs touching as in figure 2), the left thumb and first finger pinch and



twirl the doubled-over end of the thread between them so it resembles a broken end. This twisted end is then placed between the right thumb and first finger beside the genuine end already there (fig. 3).

The left hand, now empty, drops down the thread and regrips it as at the beginning, and the entire pseudo-breaking and twisting sequence is repeated about three more times. Then, David continues several more times relying solely upon the nail-clicking to create illusion and forgoes the twisting action—it isn't necessary after the first four breaks and it takes too much time.



Once he has reached the end of the thread, he says, "Hey, you want to see that last trick again?" Then he grasps the dangling genuine (left) end of the thread and separates his hands to show the thread restored.

The success of this depends entirely upon the offbeat manner in which David presents it. The fact that it is a repeat of a trick they've just seen, combined with the manic hilarity that is Williamson's trademark, is what really makes this seemingly obvious method fly—and fly it does, having amazed not only yours truly, but also many, many others over the past few years.

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We were pleasantly surprised at the response to our David Williamson Coloring Contest (October 1991). Entries came by mail, by FAX, and one via cellophane bag. The youngest entrant was two years old and we're not quite sure on the oldest.

There were a number of multiple entries: five individual envelopes with return addresses from Jeffery Higgins, Jeff Higgins, J. Higgins, Mr. Higgins, and Sir Higgins. And even one entire family individually entered.

Many modified the entry form by enlarging, reducing, or adding captions and drawings. Some felt Dave needed just "a little more make-up," while others thought a complete change of race was in order.

Uwe Ohlendorf wrote to explain that he had colored with an "invisible magic crayon," that could be seen by only "very good magicians." He was sure our judges would agree. Alan Wassilak added that, like Dave's insistence on "bending the rules," he had deliberately not stayed within the lines and did not use strictly crayon.

Two very clever entries took things "over the line." Craig Greenwood instructs us to hold his entry five to eight inches from our nose and watch the two images join to reveal a secret message. Meanwhile, Nolan Haims, picked off Second Place for his "Visible Painting" entry. (Yes, he does receive two copies of the *Sleight of Dave* video.)

And First Place goes to Kendall Peterson. (But he only receives one video.) The distinguished panel of judges did have a difficult time with the balance of entries, finally awarding a 74-way tie for Third Place. (Of course, there is no Third Prize.)

Congratulations to all our winners!

MAGIC

COLORING CONTEST WINNERS

ANGIE FREIDRICH
Ft. Jennings, OH

1ST PLACE - KENDALL PETERSON
Charleston, SC

2ND PLACE - NOLAN HAIMS
Stamford, CT

RUBY JACKSON
Sag Harbor, NY

CRAIG GREENWOOD
Chandler, AZ

PATRICIA CLANCEY
Lancaster, CA

W.A. MITCHELL
Ft. Worth, TX