THE SECRET OF RESTAURANT MAGIC

bу

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For

DANNY ORLEANS

A good friend and fine performer who has heard all of this before -- because much of what follows has been the subject of an on-going conversation about close-up magic we have been having for the past four years.

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I. POINT OF DEPARTURE

In the following pages you will find some of my reflections upon the fascinating topic of restaurant magic -- and also upon some of the elements and strategies which, I think, contribute toward success for a magician who performs in this setting.

What follows is, admittedly, impressionistic rather than comprehensive. My reasons for this are: First of all, that it is impossible to cover fully an entire field in the course of a few pages or a single lecture -- the purpose for which this material was assembled. Second, other writers (most notably, Kirk Charles) have already provided a fuller account of the field and have discussed many of the nitty-gritty questions -- such as "How does one get a job in a restaurant?" and the everinteresting "How much should I ask to get paid?" Consequently, I have chosen a different approach which, I hope, will also have some value.

I want to reflect upon a few of the issues in this field which most interest me -- personally -- as one who has worked in restaurants and lounges for the entire length of his full-time professional career. My purpose, however, is not to "preach" -- nor is it to tell people I have never met, or seen perform, what they should do to be successful. I am, quite frankly, talking here to -- myself -- and to those who care to listen -- about some of the facets of restaurant work which I think are important but which remain, shall we say, "hidden" in the usual discussions of this field.

II. TABLE HOPPING

Magicians often ask me questions that begin with the words, "When you table hop, do you...."

Dear readers, I NEVER "table hop"! -- a phrase which, in my mind, conjures up images of insincere social butterflies flitting here and there ... or fake-fur Easter bunnies with large baskets hopping from table to table. Pretty gruesome stuff. (I should add that when one "tips" the scales at 200+pounds, one doesn't "hop" much at all.)

Seriously, the label "table hopping" is near the top of my hit list. In fact, it ranks second (after "patter") as the phrase that, if I had a cosmic magic wand, I would banish forever and ever from the vocabularies of all close-up magicians. I think it is a terrible label that demeans rather than enhances what close-up magicians do and what close-up magic is all about. Somehow, "table hopper" seems much nearer to "clown" than it does to "artist." Further, it just doesn't seem to me that one who describes himself to a prospective employer as a "table hopper" is likely to be the candidate for a very high salary. (He might even be asked to work for nothing ... for tips!)

Granted, how one reacts to words is a highly subjective matter. I can only repeat that, to me, the phrase "table hopping" is one that I would never ... ever ... use in describing what I do. One needs to be attentive to words because words have a way of shaping, if not creating, reality!

The truth is that how this prospective employer comes to see and evaluate you very often begins with his observations of how you appear to view and evaluate yourself. If you think and act as though what you are doing is trivial and unimportant, don't be surprised when others view you and your magic as trivial as well.

* * *

III. HOSPITALITY

Are magicians in restaurants to fool people?

I would say: "Not for long!"

A magician's magic should, of course, be deceptive; it should fool people. Yet, there is considerably more to successful restaurant magic than simply "fooling people." I repeat: fooling people -- that is, doing your tricks deceptively -- isn't enough if you really want to be successful in a restaurant setting.

A magician is an extension of the hospitality function in a restaurant. This is what it is all about in a nutshell. This is, further, the pivotal assumption from which all bargaining for salary must begin.

If you were to attend a National Restaurant Association Show or read some restaurant trade journals, you would find that hospitality is a concept, a "handle," to which many restaurant owners and managers can relate. It is something that the wiser ones already understand is important for their restaurant's success.

Not only is close-up magic a highly personalized form of entertainment for patrons, a magician in a restaurant is a friendly face that one sees upon returning a second time, a smiling face that welcomes (by name if the performer is smart) ... you ... and tells you that he is happy you have returned. To "celebrate" your return, this magician will perform a delightful mystery, a unique entertainment that (again, if the performer is smart) may even include a souvenir ... something for you ... personally.

It's all hospitality.

The restaurant is providing something very special for its patrons, something they will talk about with their friends, something that will help the restaurant itself stand out in people's minds ... to encourage their positive responses and returning patronage.

IV. THE REAL SECRETS

What are the REAL secrets of restaurant magic? Do these secrets have to do with tricks? -- that is, are the real secrets of restaurant magic little more than the secret workings of specific conjuring tricks?

Stated in this way, of course, the questions rather answer themselves, don't they?

Do they?

During the past year, I had the opportunity to visit with magicians in many parts of the United States -- and I was struck repeatedly by the fact that what really seems to interest the vast majority of my fellow conjurors is not at all what makes for success as a magician in a restaurant.

Aren't most magicians interested in learning new tricks and sleights? Isn't this their central, if not all-consuming, interest? And doesn't this interest partially account for the fact that quite a bit of the close-up magic one sees is pretty awful entertainment?

About a year ago, I gave a lecture to a group of magicians during which I did not explain the workings of a single trick -- new or old. My intent was not simply to see if I would be "tarred and feathered" and ridden out of the room on the proverbial rail (though there was, of course, that curiosity!), it also rested on the fact that I

happen to hold the odd belief that conjurors really ought to be interested in talking and thinking about many, many things other than magic tricks and how they work. On that occasion, I thought it might be worthwhile to talk about the quality of a close-up performer's interactions with his audience.

I wasn't tarred and feathered, of course, but neither was the group estatic. The general consensus seemed to be that it was a very good lecture except for the fact that I hadn't explained any tricks. (So be it!)

This isn't surprising and hardly comes as news to anyone familiar with the contemporary magic scene. People generally become interested in magic because they are interested in finding out how magician's tricks are done and in performing a few themselves. The problem is that there is little in current magical literature, and little happens at a typical magic club meeting, to encourage the amateur "to put away childish things" (as the Bible says) -- which is what this over-blown interest in tricks and methods (what I call being a "trick junkie") really is. Amateurs, I submit, ought to be encouraged to develop the skills needed to be successful entertainers with their magic.

The first step -- and the real secret -- is to realize, deep down in your bones, that the performer is more important than his magic.

V. THE OPENING EFFECT IS YOU

Tokusan had the reputation of being a most severe Zen Buddhist master. Students came to him from far and near and very often approached him with trembling and sometimes even with fear. One such student, his mind bubbling with many troublesome questions, came to Tokusan seeking clarity of mind and enlightenment.

The student bowed low before the master to show his humility and respect -- whereupon Tokusan took his walking stick and gave the student a sharp, stinging blow on the back of the neck!

The student was stunned. He looked at the master in disbelief and muttered: "Why did you strike me? I haven't even asked you my questions!"

Tokusan replied: "It is of no use to wait until you start talking!"

* *

The close-up performer, standing or sitting before his audience, is much like the student standing before the severe Tokusan. The audience begins its evaluation of you long before a single card is selected or a single effect is begun.

From a conjuring point of view, the above Zen story might be "translated" as follows: The "opening effect" is ... YOU!

It's true. The "opening effect" is never done with coins or cards or sponge balls or any of the props that close-up conjurors typically use. The opening effect is the performer himself. Nowhere

is this more true than in a restaurant -- where people are so "close" they can touch you.

What do your fingernails look like?

Don't continue reading! LOOK at your fingernails -- and if you find that you are viewing ten independent "horror shows," do something about it.

I am not, please understand, talking about doing magic for your family and friends -- who might generously tolerate less than attractive fingernails. I am talking here about performing in a public place for money and, hopefully, for "contacts" that will generate further work. In a restaurant, unlike in stage work, your audience can see your fingernails very clearly. You are, after all, encouraging them to look at your hands!

Is your shirt wrinkled?

Are your clothes clean and pressed?

Is your breath fresh?

Do you smell from too much after-shave lotion?

There is -- isn't there? -- the physical reality of YOU ... the "you" that your audience perceives and, for good or ill, evaluates.

There are other questions you ought to ask yourself as well: What is your attitude, your manner with people? Do you genuinely enjoy being with people? Do they seem to sense your enjoyment?

These are important -- very important -- questions for one who aspires to be a professional close-up worker in a restaurant to ask -- and upon

which to reflect.

The "opening effect" is YOU!

In a restaurant, don't be surprised if you discover that people are as interested in you as they are in your magic. Very often, they may even want to talk with you. What will you do then? Another magic trick?

The vast majority of people have never been "close" to a magician before in their lives. Don't be surprised if you find they have lots of questions for you -- ranging from "How did you become a magician?" to "How do those guys in Las Vegas make that tiger disappear?"

Some people will simply want you to listen to their one-liners: "Can you make my wife disappear?" ("Friend, this is CHICAGO ... for the right price, anyone can disappear!") and "Can you make the check disappear?" ("No, but I can triple it!") are two that come readily to mind.

In restaurant work, people are so very close to you that they will often want to talk with you ... the magician ... as well as watch your tricks. In lounge work, this is even more true -- though the questioners are also usually a bit more drunk.

VI. RESTAURANTS

In many ways, restaurants are unlikely places for the performance of magic. Even in Chicago, which seems to have more working magicians in restaurants and lounges than any city with which I am familiar, people coming into a restaurant do not expect to come face-to-face with a magician. This means the challenge facing the Chicago performer isn't much different from that confronting any other restaurant magician: It is the challenge of constructing an effective APPROACH to people who are essentially strangers -- an approach that fits you, on the one hand, and the room, on the other. It is a matter of creating interest -- and doing it as quickly as possible. It is also a matter of beginning -- and sometimes continuing -- with effects that are quick, direct, and uncomplicated.

These criteria should be underscored. A (perhaps) surprisingly high percentage of patrons in restaurants and lounges are often, indeed, "high" -- on alcohol and/or other drugs. Performing long, round about, or complicated material is like building your house on quicksand. Much the same is true of hand movements that are too rapid or sweeping -- which can easily make some drunks even dizzier. ("Look, Marsha, that magician is making those people throw-up!")

Don't, however, think that because people are drunk or stoned they are, therefore, easy targets for the magician's skill. They aren't easy. Sometimes, in fact, they can be quite taxing on one's patience as a performer and a person.

What follows from this is that I almost always get playing cards signed and/or have the selector

show his card to several other people present before it is returned to the deck. There is nothing worse than the drunk not being able to remember his or her card -- or getting frisky and denying that the revealed card is, in fact, the card. Getting the card signed and having several other people see it will save you from many dreary situations -- none of which would have the slightest entertainment value.

Restaurants, I repeat, are unlikely places in many ways as a setting for the close-up magician -- particularly if that magician himself expects people to be docile, polite "spectators" (a breed of humanity which exists only in magic catalogs and books -- and which, I must add, isn't much fun for living, breathing, people anyway!) People watching magicians in restaurants and lounges tend to be more ALIVE ... sometimes they are, indeed, frisky. They talk more. They joke more ... with each other and with you (if you give evidence of being alive, too). They might be polite ... and they might not. They might even be very rude.

Aldous Huxley's wife, Laura, wrote a book some years ago with the marvelous title, You Are Not the Target. A central theme of the book is that very often, when people act out toward you with rudeness, or when they are impatient with you, or irritable ... you are not necessarily the real "target" of their anger and irritation. The "real target" might be the argument they had with their spouse earlier that morning, the fact that their kids are driving them crazy, that their boss is devoid of sympathy and understanding, etc., etc. "You" may just happen to be there ... when they're "letting off steam," so to speak. Since "you" are not the "target" of their maxi- or mini-aggression,

there is no point in <u>you</u> taking it personally and "getting into it" with them -- which, needless to say, only adds fuel to the fire.

I can't tell you the number of times in the past six years, while performing in restaurants, that I have taken a deep breath and said to myself, " \underline{I} am NOT the target!" I hope you don't think I'm joking here. I'm not. The fact is that significant number of people come into restaurants, as we say, "bummed out" -- expecting and, I suspect, sometimes hoping that they will have a rotten time. They focus exclusively on what is wrong ... what "isn't right." It is the triumph of negative thinking. Who knows what is going on in their lives. Whatever the tragedy, crisis, irritation or problem might be, some individuals seem to take a certain sadistic delight in taking out their frustrations on strangers. And what better place for an ill-tempered person to act out than in a restaurant where other people are there to serve him (or her)! A friend who is a waiter in a well-known Chicago restaurant recently told a rude and outrageously demanding table of people: "Look, folks, I'm here to serve you ... but I'm not your slave!"

It is easy to perform for people who are polite, appreciative and enthusiastic about your abilities. That is the easy aspect of restaurant magic. Here are two approaches that I use with rude and irritable partons. First, once I realize what is happening, I finish the effect I'm doing, thank everyone, and split! The secret, however, is to leave the group without anyone at the table realizing that you have just evaluated them! Unlike the poor waiter or waitress who must remain with such people (who invariably will top things

off by leaving a low and unfair gratuity), the magician can smile graciously and walk away from unpleasant people. It is as simple as that!

Second, and much more difficult, one can attempt to make personal contact with them in spite of the fact that they're being unpleasant -- you can smile and do something that puts them into the spotlight in a wholly positive way ... or do anything that you think might work. Attempting to break through the "wall" of someone's negativity is an art in itself. Sad to say, it is very often a losing proposition -- though sometimes I do see people change, right in front of my eyes, from "bundles of negativity" into smiling people who finally grasp my hand and tell me how much they have enjoyed our time together. And that is one of the great joys of doing restaurant magic.

VII. ATTITUDE

Although others may have noticed it, it was Jeff Busby who pointed out in print when reviewing my book, Secrets and Mysteries, that "most of the information put forth depends upon a change in attitude in the close-up worker."

Exactly!

Consider, then, this quotation from the conjuring journal, The Heirophant, Number One:

"There's an expert cardman from the East who recently expressed a unique and honest attitude. When asked what card techniques he uses on laymen, he replied: 'I NEVER do magic for laymen!' Why doesn't this expert -- whose techniques are exquisite and magic is in the miracle class -- perform for laymen? The easiest guess is that the lait offers no real intellectual challenge to the expert, nor do they appreciate with fondnes. the special conditions making up a difficult effect. One imagines that an expercon artist harbors scorn for his marks; that duping the 'fish' is too easy, offering no sport or intellectual contestation. Hence, most often card experts tend to associate with other card experts. Sessions can be contests, demonstrations, forums or sharings. The layman, alas, is a mark, a pushover, a dullard, and a bore."

* *

While I certainly feel this "expert from the East" is entitled to his opinion, I would say that any performer who shares this view of laymen really ought to stay away from restaurant work. This is easily one of the worst attitudes a close-up magician in such a setting could harbor. I'm afraid people can't have much fun with a performer who feels he is "above and beyond" them. And, don't think for a moment that laymen don't sense such an attitude. They do -- even after multiple drugs.

If this expert really does think laymen are "pushovers" and that they don't provide a real challenge, I might suggest the following "therapy" -- start doing Cigarette through Quarter thirty times a night with these "pushovers and dullards" all around you. Needless to say, it can be done -- but only deceptively, I submit, by one who has a deeper appreciation for a layman's ability to provide the conjuror with real sport and challenge.

* *

Two people are at the bar and I do a show for them. They are most appreciative. A bit later, a third person joins the two people -- who ask the bartender if he will ask "the magician" to come back and do some tricks for their friend who has joined them. I return.

"Do the one where you push the cigarette through the card," the gentleman requests.

The request rather takes the surprise away, doesn't it? Yet in restaurant and bar work, one is always getting requests. Some months back, a man, pointing to his companion's hand, requested: "Do the trick where the ashes end up on her palm!" A somewhat more challenging request! I did it, of course, but not immediately. I first did a card trick and when I finished, the man repeated: "Do the one where the ashes end up on her hand!"

"Don't worry," I replied, "I'll do it ... but first I want to do a few other things to set the stage." I smiled when I said that -- and continued on -- eventually doing the ashes on the palm. Everyone was happy.

I might, of course, have simply replied: "I don't do requests" -- but that betrays an attitude that is a bit too formal and aloof for restaurant work. Look at the situation from the spectator's point of view: People want the magician to be friendly. They want you to interact with them. If they have seen you before -- and if you did something that really impressed them -- they will, of course, want you to show that effect to the new friend they have now brought into the restaurant. You need to develop strategies to repeat items -- not typically in the same evening but, perhaps, the next week.

Let me return to the two people at the bar who were joined by a third person. The man asked if I would "do the one where you push the cigarette through the card." When I began to repeat the effect, the first two, who had seen it before, began mildly to act out: "Let me see the card," the man now asked, just as I began to push the cigarette into it.

What will I do? What will I do now?

My attitude is more important than the trick: how these people <u>perceive</u> <u>me</u> is more important than the specific effect I am doing. If I fool them and yet leave them thinking that I am a cold, distant and unfriendly person ... then I have won the battle (I fooled them) but I will have lost the war (they would never think of hiring <u>me</u> for one of <u>their</u> parties)!

What SHALL I do?

What I did -- when this happened -- was this: I paused (very important ... I want him to hear

what I am going to say), looked the man directly in the eyes, smiled, and said, "You're getting a little frisky the second time around, aren't you?"

It is said <u>lightly</u> -- and that is the secret. While I do, of course, want him to relax and quiet down, I don't want that to happen at the cost of the man thinking I am a creep! When I say the line, I look the man in the eyes: I want to make contact with him. Then I look at the third person (who has yet to see the trick) and then I look back at the "offender" -- still smiling. What happened? He got the message and stopped. More important, he continued to think I was a warm and friendly person.

* *

In professional close-up magic, you must critically examine not only your magic and its deceptiveness, you must also examine your attitude and the quality of your interactions with your audiences. Don't you see that while the ego-tripping magician is most interested in himself and in what the audience is thinking of <a href="https://www.night. ENTERTAINER is equally concerned with his audience and with the quality of the experience which they are, hopefully, enjoying? Without this concern for his audience ... this care ... this appreciation for his spectators, there is no genuine interaction with them. To be successful in restaurant work, I repeat, one must be perceived as not simply an excellent magician, but also as a warm and friendly person.

VIII. RANDOM IHOUGHIS

There are two main ways of getting a job as a restaurant magician: (1) a cold call to a restaurant to attempt to set up an audition, and (2) contacts leading to the audition. The second avenue is always the best. If you can find someone else who knows the man with whom you want the audition, and if that person can call and sing your praises ... so much the better. It is easier for this third person to tell his friend how fabulous you are, what an asset you would be, etc., etc., than for you to do it. In my own work, I have been most fortunate because I have never had to "cold call" a restaurant; I have always secured my auditions through personal contacts.

While there are these two main ways of getting a job, there is only one way to keep it: to be perceived by patrons and staff as a positive person to have around -- that is, to have a proper attitude.

I might add here that there is often a good deal of melodrama in a restaurant among staff members. I have always found it best not to be seen as belonging to any one clique. Let everyone confide in you, but you must keep your mouth shut!

While it is important to stand apart from the gossip and melodrama among staff members, I do not in any way avoid them. I am happy and eager to perform for staff members, too -- if they have a moment when they are not busy. If staff members were to come into the restaurant on a night when they aren't working, I definately make a point to perform for them. In the same way, every few

weeks I will make a point of going into the kitchen and doing a <u>short</u> (usually two effect) show for the kitchen workers. And don't forget the dishwashers.

The aim, of course, is to bring joy to people ... even the people who are usually overlooked.

* *

Can you support yourself doing restaurant magic?

I would say, "No! -- not, at least, if you have any interesting derelictions."

Can you support yourself as a <u>restaurant-based</u> magician?

I would answer, "Yes, I do it."

Do you see the difference? If you do, you will not be surprised at my answer to the question "What kind of a restaurant should I look for?" by saying that I have always looked for restaurants that attract, as patrons, people with money, people who are themselves party-givers and entertainment-buyers, people who will not faint when I tell them my party fees. (Recently, after telling a doctor my fee to come to his house party, he said, "Wow!" I laughed and said, "That's exactly what your guests are going to say!" He paused and then laughed, too -- and booked me.)

The restaurant is my showcase. The restaurant in which I have performed for the past three years is a large suburban restaurant with a very large oval bar and nine tables in the lounge. There are

four dining rooms. I have never used "tent cards" proclaiming my presence in this restaurant (though I have in two other restaurants to dreary results); instead, there is a large poster of me in a nice frame directly as you walk in the front door. I do not solicit tables but will go to tables if requested. (After three years -- starting when the restaurant first opened -- there are lots of requests. When I am not performing at tables by request, I remain in the lounge where there are always lots of people to keep me busy.

* *

Restaurant (and cocktail party) magic very often demands that the magician be able to perform his wonders standing up surrounded. The greater the number of effects in your repertoire that can be performed in this style ... the better. This is a most challenging way of presenting your magic: It demands thought as well as precision. It is, for me, a most rewarding style because it affords a performer the satisfaction of knowing he can walk into any room and without any tables or boxes ... standing up ... surrounded ... he can entertain a group of people.

* *

Restaurant magic requires a good deal of energy and stamina. One is often performing constantly for long periods of time -- especially if you are successful and lots of people want to see you.

Recently, a young Chicago magician, who typically does a 30 or 45 minute stage act, told me that he had worked in a restaurant for four hours

and, after two, was completely exhausted. He looked at his watch, in fact, and thought, "Two more hours!"

Many amateurs rather romantically think that doing magic in a restaurant is all fun ... and easy. While it, hopefully, is fun, it is certainly not always fun. Performing for your friends because you feel like it, is not at all the same as performing because it is Wednesday and seven o'clock.

* *

I never want to perform while people are eating. Sometimes people will insist that I do perform while they are eating (exactly what would prompt anyone to insist that the magician perform while he and his guests are eating, is something that remains utterly mysterious to me!). I will always say, "You're eating now. Enjoy your dinner and I'll return when you're finished." Even with that, people sometimes insist that I perform now ... assuring me that "It's all right."

I will sometimes give in to the insister. When I do, do you know what invariably happens? People are trying to watch me, on the one hand, and eat on the other. Food also requires attention. And so the spectator is split: Part of him is watching the magician and another part is giving his attention to his food ... and the result is awful. You can't do much that is subtle for someone who is involved in tearing his chicken apart with both hands. (Besides, he'll make your playing cards an absolute mess!)

IX. THE SECRET REVISITED

Do you see that if you give people what they really want ... something that they feel is important ... you will have a far greater chance of being successful? I think it really <u>is</u> as simple as that!

Well, then, what do people want?

Resisting the temptation to turn this into a review of philosophy, let me say there are many ways to approach this question.

When explaining the techniques and strategies of the "cold reader" in his many books, for instance, Robert Nelson repeatedly suggested that the three major areas of life-concern are: love, money and health. These are three areas in which everyone has interest. The cold reader surely can find that helpful. Can the conjuror?

Others, more recently, have insisted that what people really want is "sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll!" Does this mean that it's all relative and that everyone wants something different?

Let me suggest some things that I think people want. These are, further, intangible "things" which a conjuror can give to people: recognition, appreciation and praise.

Everyone wants to be <u>recognized</u>. It is important that a restaurant magician be able to recognize people for whom he has performed in the past. To see their faces and remember them is a valuable skill. To see their faces and remember their

first names is an even more valuable skill -ranking right up there with the ability to control
the selected card to the top of the deck! Again,
I am here speaking of restaurant magic: Can you
imagine the impact when someone brings a friend
into the restaurant in which I work -- a friend
who has never been there before -- when I call the
the first person by name?

"Hi, John, how nice to see you again!"

John invariably is as we say, "blown away." So is his friend. John invariably also smiles. He enjoys being recognized.

Granted, I am not able to recognize everyone who walks into this restaurant by name. I wish I could.

And that is just the point.

People want to be <u>appreciated</u> -- and not simply "used" as the butt of the magician's sucker jokes. Sometimes I wonder if many magicians ever think at all: Hasn't it ever struck them that very, very <u>few</u> people enjoy being humiliated in public? Most people -- the vast majority of people -- would prefer that you appreciated them. Again, using the spectator's name in a routine is a strategy which provides him (or her) with the sense that you are dealing with him ... personally ... and not with just another anonymous, interchangeable "spectator."

People, finally, want more than recognition and appreciation. They also want <u>praise</u> for the things that they have done well ... and for themselves! This is one reason why I am fascinated

with effects that put the spectator into the spotlight, make him or her the "star," and which, naturally, lead to praise from the performer for their being "such a wonderful magician."

When all is said and done, this is not so much a question of strategy as it is of attitude. It is a question of concern for these strangers who, for a brief time, are with you as your audience. If in your work as a restaurant magician you are able to give people this sense of recognition, appreciation and praise, you may find that you are well on the road to professional and personal success.

* * *