

MAGIC IS HARD

**A short essay
by Ian Rowland**



Magic Is Hard

It's seriously, searingly hard and difficult to do. Magicians don't talk about this enough, which I think is a shame because it really matters — and I'll explain why in a moment. Performing magic is hard because it calls for a five-track mind. Let me break it down for you.

1. First of all, you have to take care of the *effect* — the story that the audience follows and that leads to an impossible yet impudently real conclusion. Every trick is a sly symphony of cognitive vandalism that feeds the logic of cause and effect through a shredder of incantations, like this:

Step 1. I can follow this and understand it.

Step 2. I can follow this and understand it.

Step 3. That's impossible! No way! How?!

When you perform magic, you have to tell this story clearly and efficiently.

2. While you're doing that, you also have to take care of the *method*. I'm referring to all the secret stuff you're doing that the audience must remain unaware of.

3. At the same time, unless you're a 'silent' act, you have to deliver your *words* or 'patter', which is usually a mix of script and improvisation. This means you have to be clear, eloquent and listenable, with good vocal projection, smart pacing and appropriate light and shade in your voice. Depending on the type of act you do, you may also be trying to deliver gags and get laughs.

4. On top of all that, you have to handle physical *props*. As we know, some tricks involve incredibly deft sleights that can take a lifetime to master. But handling any props at all calls for skill and care. Even if you just need to hold up a mystery envelope, you have to display it clearly, be aware of your sightlines and angles and make sure everyone can see what they need to see.

5. Finally, you have to interact with *spectators*, which involves taking your carefully rehearsed performance and shaking the spice of unfathomable unpredictability all over it. You might get a polite, attentive spectator who follows instructions perfectly. You might get an ape who thinks it's hilarious to disrupt your act and 'make the tricks go wrong'. Whoever you get, and whatever happens, you have to be able to deal with it.

There are your five tracks: effect, method, words, props, spectators. Your mind has to be able to run all five tracks at the same time, minute by minute, second by second. Unlike actors shooting a movie, you don't get retakes or second chances. You have to get it right in one take, the first take, the only take.

Needless to say, not everyone has the necessary aptitude for this. Different minds excel at different things, such as driving a bus, laying bricks or negotiating a nuclear arms treaty. The question is, what percentage of our species has the five-track mind required to perform magic well and make it look easy? I don't have any hard facts on this, but experience suggests that it's a vanishingly small percentage. It's just not something most minds can do well.

Most magicians, most of the time, don't think about this. They rarely if ever take a moment to reflect on just how grimly, fiendishly hard it is to perform even a simple trick well. This is a shame because it's truly, desperately important — for at least two reasons.

Here's my first reason. If we remember that magic is hard, we might also remember to feel immensely proud of one another. It doesn't matter whether you're amateur or pro, famous or just the best magician in your kitchen. Everyone in this community has learned how to make something brain-fryingly difficult look like 'it just happens'. We should regard one another with respect, admiration and love.

Being able to perform magic for people is, ironically, almost a genuine magical power. Think of the things you can do: fill a cabaret club with laughter and delighted amazement; turn a drab party into a great one; make a child's eyes light up with giggling joy — even if she's in a hospital bed at the time. That's a pretty good set of superpowers. Superman can fly but he has the *slight* benefit of being fictional. We're stuck in the realm of the real — yet still the magic happens.

By the way, I don't think there's anything wrong if we turn into one big 'mutual admiration society'. No one else knows enough about what we do to fully appreciate it. Outsiders don't know a Dye Tube from a Lateral Tenkai. We have to admire one another because nobody else can do it for us. Only we can see the invisible skills we have.

Here's the second reason to remember that magic is hard: it might remind us to look after one another. You see that expert close-up guy with five weekly residences who gets all the rave reviews? Maybe he's enjoying all his success and has a fantastic life. Then again, maybe he's still hurting inside from his ghastly divorce a year ago and doesn't feel he can say anything because 'big boys don't cry'.

See that brilliant cabaret magician over there who gets all the classy cruise gigs? Maybe she's loving every minute. Then again, maybe she's worried sick about her teenage daughter hanging out with a 'bad' crowd and she thinks drugs are involved. See that big headline star with his own illusionist show? Yes, perhaps he's revelling in his success. Then again, maybe his timing was a bit off this evening because Mum's in hospital and the medics say she only has a few weeks left.

Magic is hard and life can be harder. All the more reason to be there for one another; to reach out and say, "Hey, I gather things are a bit rough right now. Can I help? I'm here for you if you want to talk (and not just about magic for a change)".

I think we can all remember that magic is hard and therefore show one another the respect, admiration and love we deserve. And also remember to look after one another. We can and we should, because that's when the real magic starts.

Magic is hard. Share the pride, help with the ride.

— Ian Rowland

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“Ignite a candle of love in every meeting, and with tenderness rejoice and cheer ye every heart. Care for the stranger as for one of your own; show to alien souls the same loving kindness ye bestow upon your faithful friends.

Should any come to blows with you, seek to be friends with him; should any stab you to the heart, be ye a healing salve unto his sores; should any taunt and mock at you, meet him with love. Should any heap his blame upon you, praise ye him; should he offer you a deadly poison, give him the choicest honey in exchange; and should he threaten your life, grant him a remedy that will heal him evermore. Should he be pain itself, be ye his medicine; should he be thorns, be ye his roses and sweet herbs.

Perchance such ways and words from you will make this darksome world turn bright at last; will make this dusty earth turn heavenly, this devilish prison place become a royal palace of the Lord - so that war and strife will pass and be no more, and love and trust will pitch their tents on the summits of the world.”

— Bah’ai prayer

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where I provide a range of free items for my friends in the magic community.

— Ian Rowland