

Conversation with Eugene Burger - By Romany

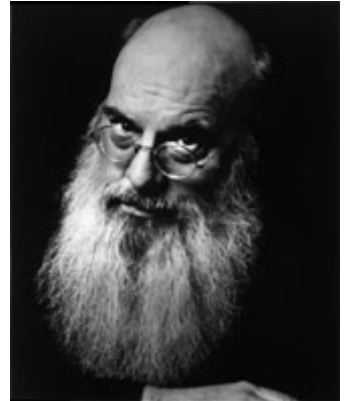
I first met Eugene Burger at FISM Dresden in 1997 in my first year of learning magic and was fascinated and inspired by his original lectures. I've still been a student of his magical theory through his books and McBride master classes. As the series of awards given to him by the world of magic attest:

Magic Castle Close-Up Magician of the Year (2 times)

Magic Castle Lecturer of the Year (2 times)

100 Most Influential Magicians of the 20th Century (MAGIC magazine)

"Best Magician" (Chicago magazine, "Best of Chicago" issue, Aug 2003)



I know that I am not alone in considering Eugene one of the finest magicians, teachers and thinkers about magic there is. So at the latest Masterclass I attended with Jeff McBride and Eugene in Las Vegas, I asked him to summarise some of his magical thinking.

The Importance of Importance: A conversation with Eugene



Romany: Eugene, you've been doing magic for 25 years now...

25 years plus.

Romany: What is the most important lesson that you've learnt in that time?

(Smiles) To make the magic that I do appear to be important to the people who see it.

Romany: And how do you do that?

That's a big problem. How do we do that? Well, the first way would be to treat my magic as if it were important to me. If I think what I'm doing is important, it might be that I can make my audience

believe that as well. Much magic, particularly close-up magic I think, is presented as if it is not important; it is trivialised. It is presented in much the same way as doing stunts, you know, balancing a chair on your head or a feather on your nose. While that can be exceedingly entertaining - you can stop a party doing that and everyone can enjoy it! - But for me that's not magic. They are stunts. So the question is how do I get my audiences to see my magic as magic and not as a series of stunts?

Romany: Lets take a card trick. How do you start making a card trick important?

I might begin by making the cards themselves important. If I just take a deck of cards out of my pocket and toss it onto the table and start, that's one way to go about it. But what if I take the pack out of my pocket, hold it up, look at it and say something like, "I've always been fascinated with playing cards. You know, fortunes have been won and lost, loves have come and gone, on the turn of a single card." And now, I'm giving the deck of cards themselves a mythology and, in the process, I'm trying to elevate what I'm doing. My inner sense is that the more important I can make this card trick, the more zeros I can add to my fee at the end of the evening.

Romany: Which is a good thing!

Which is a good thing! And so that's the big issue that I've learned over the years. I don't want to be marginalised as a performer that one can simply ignore. You know, I think the two performers that most influenced me in this regard have been Max Maven and Jimmy Grippo.

Max is a great master at making every moment in his performance an important moment. We can all learn so much from him in this area.

Jimmy Grippo I saw him back in 1981 before I had written any books, and no-one knew who I was. And there he was at the magic meeting. So I went up to him and introduced myself and said, "I've always wanted to see you perform." And he said, "well, you do something first." So I did an early version of card warp, the wonderful Roy Walton trick. Then Gino Munari gathered some people that weren't magicians, putting me on Jimmy's right and Jimmy did a half hour show for us. And... dear God, he was amazing...

Romany: Why?

Well, it wasn't like as though he was doing card tricks. It was as if he was doing miracles! These lay people were being put into the Twilight Zone. And I was too. It was the same trick over and over, you know, his famous effect where the selected card appears in his inner jacket pocket.

Romany: So how did he make that important?

By acting as if it was important! He treated what he was doing as if it was important. Look, if I'm just throwing my magic away or punctuating every moment with a stupid joke, then no-one is going to take it or me seriously. But Jimmy Grippo was presenting his magic as if it were the most important thing on the planet. And I bought into it, just as these people did and truly it was amazing.

Romany: In your opinion which current performer really succeeds in establishing the importance of their magic?

Max Maven. And I say that not because he is a close friend of mine, but I've had a chance to see him perform close-up, parlour, short acts on stage and full evening shows. I've had the opportunity really to study his work. As audience members, we know what he is doing is important because that's how he's relating to it. And so I catch that sense of importance, much as I might catch measles or chicken pox... In the same way, I can catch a performer's enthusiasm. When you have a performer who loves what he is doing and radiates that love, then as an audience member, I can catch it.

Romany: So therefore as performers we need to find out what it is in our act that is important to us.

Well, that would help, wouldn't it? That's the challenge of performing magic. It's easy to perform magic as a throw away....

Romany: Or as a trickster.

Or as a trickster, sure. And when I first started doing magic, that's pretty much where I was. I was a trickster who just wanted people to like me.

Romany: When did you move from trickster to the Eugene we now holds court, weaving stories of life and death? How did that transition come about?

That transition came about through 3 friends, particularly Max, Jeff McBride, Tony Andruzzi and Bob Neale. These 4 people, each in their own way, gave me permission to try something a little more serious, something that might have a deeper impact and not just be the silly guy with the clown nose.

Romany: I can't imagine you with a clown nose.

(Laughs) Thank you! No, I never had a clown nose. You know Romany, it took me a long time to realise that not all laughs are good laughs. In fact some laughs are very bad.

Romany: For example?

Some laughs make the audience think that the performer is an idiot or cruelly insensitive to the feelings of his helpers or whatever. But we tend to be hypnotized by laughter and think that all laughs are good for us and our show. But i'm afraid that's not true. Some laughs are very bad indeed.

Romany: Eugene, you are known as an accomplished teacher who brings out the best in your students.

I hope so.

Romany: When you meet each student for the first time. What are you looking for?

I'm looking to understand them and what they want. That's why very often, I ask people right away, "what do you see yourself doing in three years with your magic? Where do you see yourself performing? Do you see yourself in a theatre, on a cruise ship, working a corporate cocktail party or a trade show?" Do you see yourself performing for friends and, perhaps business associates?" Because as a teacher, my aim is to help you actualise your goal, not my goal for you. When people who don't have much of a background in magic come to study with me, they ask "where do we start?" And I say, "well, we start with what interests you." If you don't have any knowledge of magic, I would probably suggest that you get a big magic catalogue from Hank Lee or Davenports and go through it and see if you can imagine yourself doing each effect. Where? For whom? There is no point in teaching people coins tricks when they dream of performing card magic.

Romany: Ali Bongo advised me to watch as much magic as I could.

Oh absolutely! I agree! And read as much magic too. I tell my students that for every book they read published after 1960, read two that were published before! Not just magic in your field of interest. For example, my field of interest was close-up magic but I would read a lot of magic history and I loved reading about stage shows even though I didn't have any sense at that time that I would ever be a stage magician. That came much later in my 60's when it was time for a new career development. Jeff McBride said, "Why don't you be in a show with us?"

Romany: Which show was that?

Well, the first stage show was in the late 1990s with the Shakespeare Festival in Los Angeles which a series of ghost scenes from Shakespeare. I was the connection between them who performed mysterious effects. Then later, Jeff McBride and his wife Abbi and I did a show together in California. And I discovered that I really liked it. I had had no confidence up to that point that I would be any good as a stage performer. I really thought of myself as a close-up performer and that was the end of it. But Jeff and Abbi came to the opening night of the Shakespeare show and were really encouraging. Then Max helped me with that show too. He came to more than half of the rehearsals and also came to more than half of the shows and every time he came, we would go out for coffee afterwards and he would have endless performance notes for me. You know, Romany, learning how to receive notes on your performance is very important. It is about listening and not about defending yourself and all that nonsense.

Romany: So just as you are a mentor for many, many magicians, you've had several mentors too.

Oh yeah, Max and Jeff have certainly been great mentors to me. They knew things that I didn't know. I knew how to do close-up magic and engage a small group of people but I really had no confidence that I could engage an entire audience of 400. And it was their confidence in me that got me to try this and not to say no. Then Jeff and Abbi and Bryce and Jenny and I did this show in Atlantic City. I never imagined that I would be doing a casino show. That was the farthest thing in my imagination. And that we would start the show with the Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva presentation in Atlanta City, New Jersey! The opening trick! I just couldn't believe that Jeff wanted to do that! And indeed he did. And it worked beautifully! And then Max wrote a show for Tina Lenert, him and me called "The Nocturnal Trio", and so I perform in that show too. I'm very lucky!

Romany: Tell me what you advise people to do in order to become better magicians.

First you need to be very honest with yourself. I think that magicians are created one effect at a time. The game is to master one effect, not to know 400 tricks. To actually have something that you do as well as anyone on the planet, not necessarily better but as good as.

Romany: When you are teaching these master classes, what is the most important thing for you? I know that you put in long hours even after we go home at mid-night, you still sit up with Jeff making more notes for us. What is your motivation for that?

Oh, its very simple. I think I can speak for Jeff too, that we both view the teaching we do as the most important aspect of our work. I make much more money performing and so the teaching isn't about making money. It's about paying something back to magic because we've been given so much. There is also the wonderful moment when the light goes on in the students eyes, when they get it. That's the excitement of it. This is important work. As we see it, we are changing the future of magic. Just take one simple thing... For example, part of our teaching that we are very strong on is that we have to get these card tricks up to our faces and not down on the table. If it's down on the table, the television shot will be of the table and my hands! I would rather have the TV shot be the cards and my face. That means that counts have to be re-done. A lot of things need to be re-done, everything has to be re-thought. I think that that is 21st century close-up magic, it's now up in the air and not down on the table.

Romany: That's about improving communication between the magician and the audience. I was watching an advanced sleight of hand trick just now. It was good but because the cards were down and he didn't engage my eyes, I felt as if I had been tricked. Which is interesting.

Yes, you see the top of the performer's head and feel that you've been tricked!

Romany: So what is going on between the magician and me during a card trick?

Well, there is this triangle: you, the magician and the cards. Frankly, I think that magic is really about the magician. The magician creates the magic. So really what the show is about is that person. And not simply about stunts that this person is able to accomplish. In that sense, close-up magic to me has always been about a relationship. This fragile, short-term relationship with strangers. A relationship that might last only 6 minutes and then be gone for ever. And the question is that when those 6 minutes is over, what was the quality of that relationship? How did the audience feel? How did they feel about the relationship and how did they feel about me? Did they feel that this was a wonderful relationship and that I would be a good person to have over for dinner? (Laughs)

Romany: Or did they feel fooled?

Or did they feel fooled and deceived? (Smiles) You know Romany, let's be honest: that's ok too! It's okay to be a trickster! That's just one option. You need to understand that I don't think that my way is the only way for everyone else to do this! I believe truly that the House of Magic has many rooms and that there is room for everybody. There is room for people who just want to be tricksters and do stunts. That's okay for them but not for me. That's not what I want to do. I want to do more than perform stunts. I really want the people who experience one of my performances to feel that they were very fortunate to have seen this, that they were lucky to get someone so special for this event. Magicians by definition are very special people, you know. I want them to sense that they are lucky to have me there because I am special!

Romany: Eugene, we do. Thank you.

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