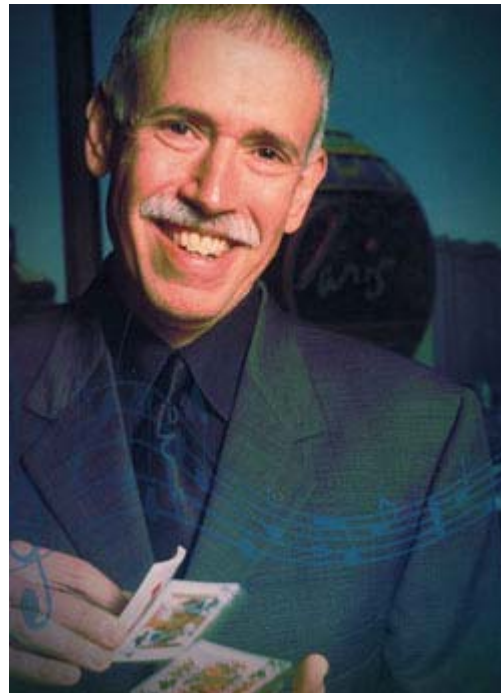


Conversation with Michael Close - By Romany

It's 3.30 am in Vegas and I can't sleep. I blame Michael Close. Before my reputation - and his - lies in tatters, I should explain. When I last interviewed Pam and Johnny Thompson, Pam strongly recommended that I go see Michael Close working in Houdini's bar at the Monte Carlo. Past the usual flashing and beeping slot machines I find Houdini's. There's a guy playing the piano but no magician as far as I can see, but I'm happy to sink into an armchair and listen to the music. The piano player is twinkling jazz standards out on the ivories, tootling and smoothing out some of my favourite show tunes. Soon I am lost in thoughts of floating around a dance floor in a big "Come Dancing" feathery dress. Yellow, I think, or maybe a dark fuchsia with a dashing, strong-muscled-slick-back-raven-haired guy to whisk me across the floor... A magician mate arrives to join me. "Bad news", I say, "he's not here. It's the piano player tonight." "Are you kidding?" He replies. "That guy on the piano is Michael Close"

Wow. I know Michael is rated highly by the magic world, but forget the magic, this guy is seriously cool without lifting a double lift, if you catch my meaning. And what a gig. He plays wonderful music all night and then will perform close-up when invited. Meaning that he also doesn't approach people that probably would rather be left alone. This is a sophisticated set-up and one that most magicians would love to work. Only most of us aren't world standard pianists as well as 'Magician of the Year 2003.' When he stops for a break, I ask if he will perform some magic for us. He does. Before I tell you what I thought, let me first say that I'm not a fan of card tricks. I've gotten to dislike being fooled, to sometimes feeling almost attacked by a magician welding a pack with the opening words, "pick a card, any card". But tonight I'm totally seduced by the charm of Mike's patter, mesmerised by the impossibility of cards appearing were they really, surely couldn't and bent over laughing at his almost constant stream of jokes. I don't want to overplay this here, but honestly I haven't enjoyed a close-up magic performance like that for a long while. And it feels good to really laugh.



I can't sleep because I'm trying to work out what makes Michael's work so efficient. I'm intrigued and fascinated to know how he got to take both magic and music to such a high level. What motivated and inspired him? what still challenges him? What breakfast cereal does he eat and how does he like his eggs?...

So I asked him...

What was it that you wanted to be as a child? Which did you want to be, a musician or a magician?

Oh, I don't really think I had any ambitions one way or another. Music is something that chooses you, rather than the other way around.

So music came easily to you?

Not at all. I wasn't a child prodigy at all. The big problem was that I really wanted to know all about jazz, but where we lived there were no teachers who could teach me. So almost everything I know today about playing jazz piano, I figured out myself. I never had anyone to show me any of that stuff. I figured it all out not intuitively but analytically. At home I have a huge library of jazz theory, transcribed solos of jazz players.... I have in effect the same amount of information as I have in my magic library.

But I didn't even start to really get going on the piano until I started my master's degree in music composition when I was about 22.

So how did you learn magic?

From the age of 10 to 19 I didn't know any magicians. I would order books from Dick Stoner's magic shop in Fort Lane and study from them. Then when I was 19, I went to the Magic Castle and discovered Genii magazine and SAM... after that I met Harry Riser who was a wonderful mentor. In 1976, when I was 24, I got booked for the IBM convention doing a God-awful act with lapping and a servante that was just designed to fool magicians with none of the stuff that works in the real world. Later in 1978, a friend invited me to take over his restaurant job at Max and Erma's. I never wanted to do magic as a pro because I was doing music professionally and if you do something that you love for a living, it changes how you feel about it. But I took the job and discovered that although Harry has shown me a whole lot, almost everything I knew wasn't going to work in a restaurant. That's when I really started thinking about the fact that about 90% of stuff that you find in magic books doesn't work in the real world. Which is why I named my series of books "The workers" because they actually work.

What about your practice methods? Were you disciplined about practice, both musically and magically?

Oh, I really worked at it... I can't see doing it half-mast. I really can't. If you're going to do something and you're going to compete in the sense that you're going after work that other people are going after, then I think you have to be as good as you can. I also think that idea of offering people more than they even thought of expecting is important. Take those magicians who are working for the public. For that particular audience, that one guy is their sole experience of magic. My goal is to give them far more than they possibly expected. Why not do it really really well? You might as well. You know, John Carney points this out a lot and I think this is really important. If you don't like to practice, if you don't like the going over and over 'till its really correct, then don't perform. If your only audience is your friends and your family and your pals in the magic club, I don't care what you do. But the minute you go outside that circle and start working for people who don't care about you one way or the other, then what you do, affects me because I might be the next magician they run in to, and if they've had a bad experience, I'm going to have to work twice as hard to overcome that. I'm not saying that I'm the best magician in the world, but I am trying to work in a way that doesn't insult people's intelligence. I'm trying to provide them with the actual experience of seeing something that they literally cannot explain. That's what I work really hard at. I don't want to give them any moment where they go, "oh, I got that figured out..."

Do you still practice?

Yes. I'm very specific about what I practice. There's only a limited amount of time, so you have to be disciplined about what you work on. The other thing is to limit your repertoire. I don't have a lot of tricks. I have a repertoire of about 16 routines which get very polished since I'm doing them over and over.

So how do you feel about watching other magicians perform magic?

What I ask is that you don't take me out of the show. Don't change me from a spectator to an analytical magical watcher. I'm more than happy to suspend total disbelief and let you do your thing but you've got to make sure that you don't drag me out of it.

What do you most love about magic?

I love the performance side of it. And I love the problem solving side of it. That process of working out how I get from here to there... and more importantly, how I get from here to there without you having a notion of the path I travelled.

And what is your favourite response to your work?

I guess it's probably the stunned silence. That moment when people look and go "no f***** way"...

You perform a lot of comedy. How did that start?

I had a funny family. In my family you had to be quick or get shafted. I love the sound of people laughing. I think laughter is one of the greatest two things in the world. It's just such a wonderful feeling to hear people laughing at something you have done. This means though that I have the tendency to interrupt the normal flow of a trick to branch off into a joke - and you have to be careful about that.

What is the down-side with mixing comedy and magic?

Magicians have to be careful with the idea that they can take someone else's line and be funny with it. If you're not funny in everyday life, then don't try to be funny when you do magic. Do magic in the way that you understand yourself to be. The important thing is that people want to learn about you in whatever medium you are expressing yourself. You have to be willing to open yourself up to an audience. You have to be willing to say, "here I am, this is who I am as a human being. You're going to like me or not like me but this is who I am." The problem is that too many people think that magic will make up for whatever character flaws they have. And it won't, it will magnify them.

What is a central theme in your work?

Well, what the show is all about is our perception of reality. You thought the world worked this way? It doesn't. Something else is going on that you didn't know about... so how are you going to deal with it? It's like Daylight Savings Time.

What?

Think how goofy this is. We're all on the same time and then by agreement, we all say that it's an hour later. By agreement! We decide that reality changes at that moment. Now think how amazing it would be if you could do the same thing with something less trivial than the time. If we all just agreed at 9am that we would be nice to one another. Boom! the world changes in one second. People think that that can't happen, but it does.

And that's the real role of the Magician surely? To show people that changing reality is possible?

True.

And how do you make what you do important to people?

The way you make anything important to anyone is this: it has to be vitally important to you. There's no other way to do it. It's so important to really think about things. For example, think about the simple vanishing of a coin. If you think about it, making something cease to exist is a big deal. But how many magicians have you ever seen do it in a way that it seems to be a big deal? They don't. One thing I think about is as a magician, what does it feel like when something really disappears? When the coin vanishes, does it just go and it's gone? Or does it de-materialise? The way that we've been doing it for hundreds of years, I figure that it has to de-materialise since if it just disappeared there would have to be a noise since it's occupying space. Then if it's suddenly gone, then the air has to move into the empty space and there would be the tiniest pop. But have you ever seen anyone convey that in the vanish of a coin? No. And this is because they are more concerned with the technique than the reality.

Why does no-one think about these things?

Don't ask me.... I think about them all the time...

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