

## In Search of Better Magic - By Romany

One of my favourite magic teachers, Eugene Burger, says that good magicians are created one effect at a time. That's one effect, scripted and rehearsed both with audio and video tape so that it exists as a finished work of theatre, however short. I totally agree that this is the way to go, but in 5 years of creating and trying to improve my magic, somehow I haven't done it. My excuse is that as a jobbing performer, doing the weddings, corporate gigs, Xmas parties and street festivals, my time is spent gigging, packing/unpacking, maintaining costumes, worrying about not having work or panicking because I have too much.

So it seemed one day that the only thing to do was to take a financial gamble on supporting myself without gigs for 3 months and to go take a flying leap into Las Vegas, the land of the successful and accomplished magic, get my head down and polish, rehearse and perform.... Vegas is where the world's most prestigious magicians and magical artists - Cirque du Soleil, Penn and Teller, Lance Burton etc. live and hang out, a city of showgirls and showbiz folk. A city too of dreams - both of the entertainers who create their shows there as much as for the tourists who plunge their hard won dollars into the glittering and ever hungry slot machines...

Funny really. It happens that the weekend I arrive is the very weekend that Jeff McBride and Eugene Burger are having a magic Masterclass in Jeff's Magic Centre which is also home to the Wonderdome Theatre. Jeff McBride is a major magic performer and teacher and has also been my magic mentor for the last 5 years. He watches my act and points out the bits that aren't working: "Finish the end of your sentences...you're showing a finger break on those cards...punctuate the applause points.... use a yellow feather rather than purple, it shows up more..." etc.

The act I'm working on is called 'Sequins and Loincloths' and was directed and jointly devised by Sarah Brignall and myself. Sarah trained at Lecoq for 2 years, has worked with companies such as The Right Size, Told by an Idiot and Rejects Revenge before performing her own work at Edinburgh and around the world. She now continues to perform and direct new work. We spend a year carving out a 20 minute piece out of my 8 notebooks of ideas and frustrated attempts at magic and it turned out to be a comedy piece, much to my surprise.

In it, the 'Diva of Magic' (magical equivalent of Barbara Streisand and Glen Close), arrives to perform in Las Vegas straight from playing the London Palladium. Airport security have had an issue with her suitcase of pyrotechnics...and she arrives with most of her show having been destroyed in a controlled explosion with a deceased wardrobe mistress and Simon the sound man just out of intensive care. It's very much in the European tradition of clowning and my American teachers are dubious. But they go with it and at the end of the weekend, McBride asks, "Romany, do you reckon you could perform your own show here in April?" (10 weeks away)

I gulp and reply, "OK". then add, "I'm only saying that because I think I should, not because I think I can"

"That's settled then."

Oh good. Oh bloody hell. But if the prospect of performing magic in front of the world's finest magicians doesn't get me to practise and rehearse, nothing will.

I find that Vegas has two abundantly stocked magic shops with friendly owners and even better there's a resident prop maker Chris Barnes who beavers away 'til 2am everyday and who can rustle up tables and gizmos quicker and more reliably than any prop maker I've met to date. I join the gym to maintain my fitness since no-one actually moves in this town other than to get in and out of their cars. Since this is Vegas the front rows of any class is full of blond leggy show-girls and retired prima ballerinas with their hair still scraped back and endless legs. They give me a scathing look and I join the rest of the human race at the back.

Apart from leaping around there, I spend the next 10 weeks with my lap-top, trying out the new script in front of the video camera or mini-disk recorder. There's the technical part to master. It's not just the presentation but the actual skill which must be thoughtless too. Eugene says "Thinking kills magic." He's right, it's got to be as effortless as the ballerina's leap or the thinking will signal to the audience not only the technique behind the deception but will also break the suspension of disbelief. I find that mastering the sleight of hand the hardest thing. Writing stories, creating costumes - easy. Mastering that nifty-grifty sneaky move - aaaagh, not. So I sit in my room, ignoring the Vegas sunshine outside,

fiddling over and over with bits of cotton, with paper clips, with appearing flowers - that don't appear....  
bugger....back to the drawing board....

Weeks pass. I'm enjoying myself, getting into a routine of fitness at the gym, rehearsal, devising in my room and meeting up with the other Vegas artists and magicians. They take me as their guest to the shows. Earl Chaney, the original Ronald McDonald clown and now owner of one of the magic shops takes me to Showgirls of Magic, Badger gets me into see the other showgirls at the Follies where he works as a stage hand. Eugene takes me to the Lance Burton show and introduces me to Lance after the show, "of course you know Romany.... " he doesn't but smiles anyway. It's inspiring and motivating to be surrounded by show-folk. Then suddenly there's only one week left. I'm presuming that McBride will headline the show and do the final 20 mins. I figure that if he headlines, whatever I do will be overlooked by the general standard he'll set by his act. I ring him on the Wednesday before the show on Saturday. He's just arrived back from Singapore.

"Jeff, you are going to do the show aren't you?"

"Romany, I can't tell you yet."

Ah. My security disappears. I'm missing a 20 minute headlining chunk of the show. But there is nothing to be done now but to get down to serious and panicky final rehearsal.

Thursday afternoon. The phone rings. It's Jeff.

"Hey Romany, I can do your show."

"Great. Can you headline and do the final 20 minutes?"

"No, I'll do an opening 10 mins and you're head-lining."

Oh god. But I have a sneaky feeling that that was what I wanted all along...

Friday and a dress run. It's terrible. I wonder what I've been doing for 3 months. We finish the run and the tech crew start to pack up. I'm desolate and in total panic. Nothing to be done now before tomorrow. It will be a disaster and all the mega Vegas magicians and the rest of audience will cringe in their seats. Then Slyvia, Luna Shimada and Dirk Losander appear out of nowhere. Slyvia Braillier is a warm and creative friend, once dancer, acrobat etc and now theatre practitioner. Luna, a fabulous, charismatic stage magician and her partner Losander an equally talented stage magician. They've heard I was doing the final rehearsal and thought I could do with some help. So I do another run and they laugh. They laugh! I get notes too but thank everything that moves, they laugh. I am so so so relieved...

Somehow it's 5 pm. I've been doing dress runs since 8am and now I'm hungry, tired and still a little desperate. It's definitely time for Starbucks. Sitting there reviving with sugar and a mega hit of caffeine, I write another list of what still needs to be sorted for tomorrow. Someone comes in and I look up, knackered, quickly changing it to a "everything under control" look when I see that it's Jeff come in by coincidence to get some coffee. This guy has been my much admired mentor and supporter for years and someone that I really want to impress and do well for. Over a grande caramel macchiato he asks, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Funnily enough, there isn't, it's all done. Everything is organised and prepared, people are primed to work on the different crews, the other acts are hired and we're ready to rock.

He says, "You see, Romany, I had to back off, so that you could learn to do it yourself". Suddenly I understand what he's been up to. Not knowing whether he would be able to headline the show or direct it had made me work to carry it myself and now having him in it was icing on the cake.

Cut to 4pm Saturday. I've arrived early so that I can get in and set up before my crew arrive. But Paul Daniels is doing a master class in the space and we can't get in til 5.30pm. Its great to meet Paul and Debbie but time is much tighter than I had planned and it flies by while setting up. Somehow it's only 30 minutes before curtain up and I'm trying to get the eyelashes on straight, to think of my script etc. But I'm struggling. Curtain up, and I wing it in front of a wonderfully friendly audience. The other acts seem to be going well, then I realise that.....oh god, I've left some of my props in the car that I need for the second act and where are the car keys??? The mike pack gaffer taped to my bum isn't the right now for the mike I have. McBride, world-class magic star, battles with my g-string and gaffer tape to change the pack. I have a miraculous dresser who is steadfastly ignoring my increasing panic. My 'feather to cane' prop has disappeared, the car keys are found, but I've forgotten to dry the flash wool I need for a confetti launcher at the end of my act. I don't deserve to be in the theatre, I don't deserve to be in Las Vegas, I am a fraud.... Shoot me now and put my head on the city walls for all to see.

Back on stage, I drift off script in the strongest case of jitters I've ever had but they laugh anyway. There are some major magic men at the back of the audience and I fluff up my first magic sequence, but again people laugh. Sod it, I give up trying to impress anyone and relax into character and enjoy it 'til somehow, suddenly it's over, they're applauding and then.... They're standing up. My first standing ovation. Someone comes up with a bouquet - real flowers! And more applause. I dreamt of this when I was little, dreamt all this... But I'm feeling inside that I fluffed it, a feeling that only subsides when I get outside to the audience after the show and feel the buzz of a happy crowd. I smile anyway - 'Fake it 'til you make it' as they say.  
"Can I take my clothes off now?" I ask the audience and head back-stage to change.

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