

# The Highs and Lows of a Travelling Diva of Magic - By Romany

**"Gotta keep moving on, gotta keep moving on**

**Don't let my hopes slip away**

**Dream as if I'll live forever**

**Live like I'll die today**

*From "Moving on" by Zoe Lewis*

Strong coffee and a big slice of cake is the reward for gritting through the 'why-do-I-go-but-strangely-I-enjoy-it' Saturday morning boxing class. Divas of Magic keep muscles toned and caffeine n' carrot cake levels high. Push up the hill on the bike home and pack the car for tonight's gig, prop bag full of magic props, sparkle red 10" heels, make-up and jewellery, evening dress slung on the back seat, contract with location checked on the front. The late Brighton afternoon sun is still shining, bright and perfect to set off. 2 hours later around the motorway and out into the countryside, I see the sign for Cliveden, formerly the home of three past dukes and now a luxury hotel. An intercom is hidden in the stone walls. I announce myself and the huge wrought-iron gates grate open to reveal acres of semi-manicured grounds, the house just a speck on the horizon. There is a certain peace about driving up a deserted drive with just the deer for company. I pull over to re-apply some lip-stick. At the entrance, two doormen spring out to fetch my luggage, and with a studied nonchalance, I follow them and my bags to the front door. This evening Cliveden is occupied by fifty Germans who have flown over to celebrate a wedding with full entertainment laid on for three nights. Last night, they enjoyed four opera singers and a trapeze act; the evening before, comedy waiters and a contortionist plus three hot-air balloons in the afternoon for a peaceful zoom over the English countryside. Tonight, I am to be served up with dinner. The doorman shows me down two flights of stairs into the library to change. The room is dark and musty, walls lined with gold-embossed books. I ask for a coffee. 6.15pm now and my first duty is to call dinner at 8pm. I arrange my props. Still only 6.30pm. I text a couple of my magician mates.

"I'm at Cliveden, where are you?"

"Half-way up the M1, doing a gig for a Christian youth event..."

"Doesn't sound a barrel of laughs..."

"Won't be. Fancy meeting up at the service station on the motorway afterwards?"

"Another time, enjoy the Christians..."

No sign of coffee. A ghost in the library observes that a better magician could summon one up with a quick 'hocus pocus'. Funny. Good job I brought my own banana. 8 O' clock, I am in costume, eyelashes in place, diamonds glittering, hair bouffant back-combed, teetering red-glitter platforms on, layers of lip-stick blotted and layered again, cards, coins, ropes and Tibetan bells secreted about my person. I am a High Society Theatrical Diva about to descend - or ascend as it is tonight - to my public. The girl in purple jeans and a prop-crammed blue Renault Clio is far removed. Pull up from the hips, in at the waist, chest out, chin up. Greet everyone in a confident and charismatic fashion. Bend over, and your props will fall out of their secret pockets and roll, clattering into the cracks in the floorboards. A visit to the Ladies is especially precarious.

Upstairs the log fire in the huge fireplace is blazing, waiters are circulating with silver trays of champagne and canapes. Guests chat quietly in small groups, beautifully dressed in best German chic. Finding the newly weds, I introduce myself and explain my plan for the evening.

Now to work. Hopping onto a central chair, I strike my Tibetan singing-bowl loudly. The crowd freeze-frames in mid-canape bite. Another resounding chime and any remaining chatter stops. I stand on the chair, golden bowl in one hand, a clutch of fuchsia and purple ostrich feathers in the other. I love this moment. It feels like freedom to stand on this chair and both instantly create and hold the stage.

"Meinen Damen und Herren, I am Romany, your Magical Mistress for this evening. While you have been Sipping your Apperitifs, our chef has Whipped up a Smorgasbord of Delicacies for your Delectation. I will flit from table to table to entertain you with Miracles of Magic, followed by veritable Cabaret of Marvels during coffee and petit fours. ...follow me now into the Palace of Delights where dinner will be served." Spin a handful of golden confetti into the air and they laugh, some applaud. All

smile. Now the sweet flow of ushering guests to tables. I back off for starters to be served. One learns quickly in this business to avoid the waiter carrying tomato soup. Never exit from the 'IN' serving entrance. Take your initial table by storm. If your first table gasps, laughs and applauds loudly, the rest of the room will usually follow suite. But how odd it is for a complete stranger to appear where people are eating, stranger still to whip out ropes, feathers and flaming purses. Most people, like dogs, like to eat in peace. The table magician insists that diners stop mid-mouthful and choose a card, any card. It's the height of bad manners. But party society has deemed it desirable, so I approach the first table. Whoosh! A ball of flame escapes from my hand. "Aaaagh!" Responds one of the guests, tomato soup forgotten. Nothing like an unexpected ball of fire to focus the mind. Hands extended wide, I announce, "I am ROMANY". (Rule number one: make sure they know your name.) "Here to bring light, love and general hilarity in the form of magic performed in your own hands, before your very eyes." Ridiculous but true. "Look, how I become invisible and wait in the wings of this impromptu theatre, then how I burst forth to the sound of raptuous applause and the magic begins." Ridiculous and patently untrue but it's my imagination, my script and I'm sticking to it. The guests, being very well-behaved, are a little confused but willing to play along. I pretend to be invisible for a moment - try it, it's good for the soul - and they wait, hands raised as instructed in the 'applause position'. I 'appear' and they applaud enthusiastically. Wonderful really, money for nothing. Then out come the ropes and coins and darting round the table so that everyone gets to hold something, or blow on something or wiggle their fingers - or something, we play. Once guests feel that they have permission to be silly, they enter into the party spirit with gusto. I lob an imaginary pack of cards over the table and my new co-partner responds dramatically, over-miming the catch, making everyone laugh. Wonderful, wonderful, the entertainer is entertained. Of course, there is always the older gentleman, entranced by this friendly young lady with her ropes, who gets confused and can't resist, really can't resist resting his hand on her bottom. I understand, honestly sympathize and quickly move to the other side of the table with a mock-stern (but do it again and I'll use the right hook I leant this morning) shake of my Diva head. Round and round, faster and faster, coins disappear, signed cards re-appear and circular trails of energy whip the table into a peak, folding everyone into the mix, until we are smooth and high. I light the candle. "Look into the flame, clear your minds, think of a wish." Holding out a reel of cotton, I unwind a length. "This is wishing thread". A few titters of laughter roll over from the last routine and soon the table quietens, smiles fade. A moment of slight melancholy, of thinking. "When I look at you and break the thread, it is your turn to make your wish." I break the cotton into pieces, meeting their eyes one by one, seeing something I cannot name. At this moment of shared ritual, I am Keeper of the Flame, Holder of the Wishing-Thread, Witness of Dreams. The sleight of hand restoring the thread must be executed quickly since this magic space is bubble-fragile with waiters carrying off plates and chatter from the tables all around. "See here now, how impossible becomes possible." On a breath, the candle flickers and goes out, wisps of smoke curl around the thread which astonishingly, is once again in one whole piece. "So may your wishes also be." We breathe again and an escape of laughter and applause releases the moment.

Close-up magic at tables is a bowling-alley process. 3 down, 6 to go. Step outside after the third to calm down and 'de-sweat'. Divas of Magic do not drip. Not in public. Years ago, I used to dance Lambada in a restaurant twirling with my enthusiastic partner between the tables. Hips sizzling, beads of sweat would fly into their paella. I 'glow' outside for a minute or two, re-setting props, feel my feet on the floor again, and with a deep breath, plunge back into the party.

Break during main course, pointless to compete with a roast. Calm and quiet outside, I watch the crackle of burning logs and lose myself a while. But there is cabaret yet to do, so I return to the library to change props and grab some water. Cabaret or 'parlour magic' as it was known, is magic and stagecraft performed to an audience of around 25 to 70 people. It is a huge luxury to perform my own show in miniature, with the same script every time but always different. A month ago, I was working the Magic Castle in Hollywood, and drew the crowd's attention to a handsome man in the audience who was watching me with a broad smile on his face. 15 minutes later, my volunteer pointed out that the same man was still smiling at me. I looked up quickly, caught his eye and suddenly the 'Diva' had flown. I was uncovered, blushing deeply, thrown clean off script, eyes on the floor. The audience laughed for me until I could compose myself. These are the memories that last, like the time in Japan after a show when a mother asked if her child could have her wish of touching the gold glitter on my costume. When I agreed, the small Japanese girl launched herself, grabbing handfuls of my bosom, her first experience of a glittering western cleavage.

Exit finally to laughter and applause. It is 11 O' clock and I haven't eaten anything apart from a banana since 4pm. I'm still high but suddenly ravenous. I tell a waiter that I'm expecting a meal. He looks blank. I repeat, "I will wait here. Please ask the chef to make me a simple meal". After 15 minutes, he returns with a tray which I take down to the library. One for dinner. Me and the shelves of un-read books. The contrast of the merry dining room, the crystal chandeliers and laughing, chattering guests with this gloomy room is stark. Alone, the meal seems pointless, cardboard. The bubble of euphoria starts to sag and sink. I'm pleased with my work tonight but the false eye-lashes seem suddenly heavy and I take off the heels and wriggle my toes back to life. Pack props away, change back into jeans and carrying my own bags this time, tip-toe incognito through the house. Four inches shorter now, charisma packed away with the props, lips and eyes make-up bare and just the final stubborn traces of glitter left. The Diva has left the building. Guests are still partying and outside is pitch black. There are no lamps to light the driveway and navigation through the grounds avoiding stray deer takes concentration. Finding the right country lane back to the motorway another challenge now that I am tired and post-gig dejected. A performer can sparkle and shine and be the wit of the party one minute and then be down and empty, thoroughly empty the next. The lows equal the highs, I suppose. 1am, still on the motorway, eye-lids falling into sleep, I call into the services for strong coffee and will-power-can-resist-no-longer-give-me-sugar-now chocolate cake. The restaurant is empty and clutching the coffee, I stare blankly at the cartoons flickering in the children's area. 2am, zombie now, I trudge with the bags to my front door. Back at Cliveden, the wedding guests are still dancing, the magic and laughter of a few hours ago spun into a memory while the Diva has vanished Cinderella-like on the stairs to the dark library. With hot tea and warm post-gig robe, it's good to be home.

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