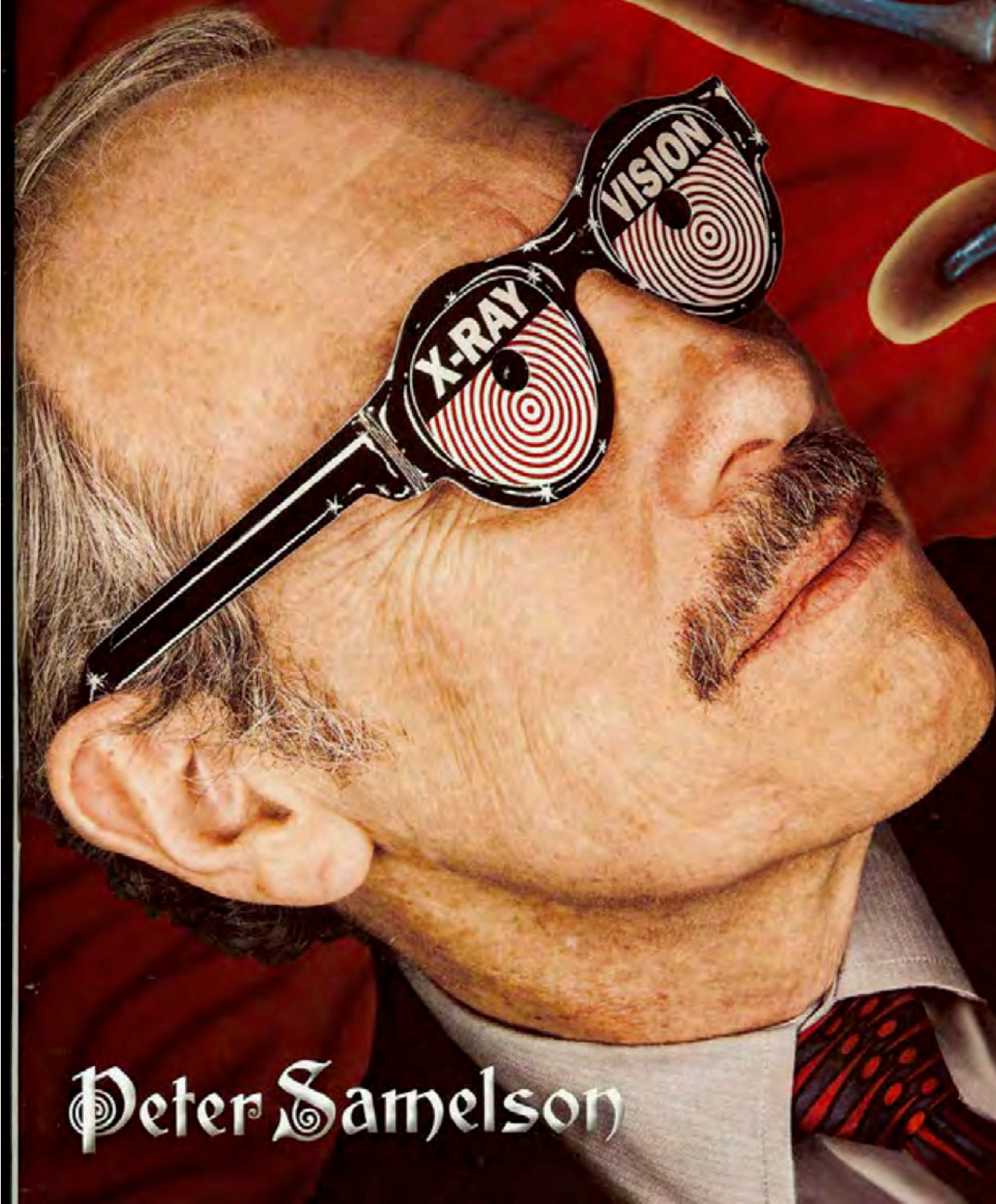


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# Genii

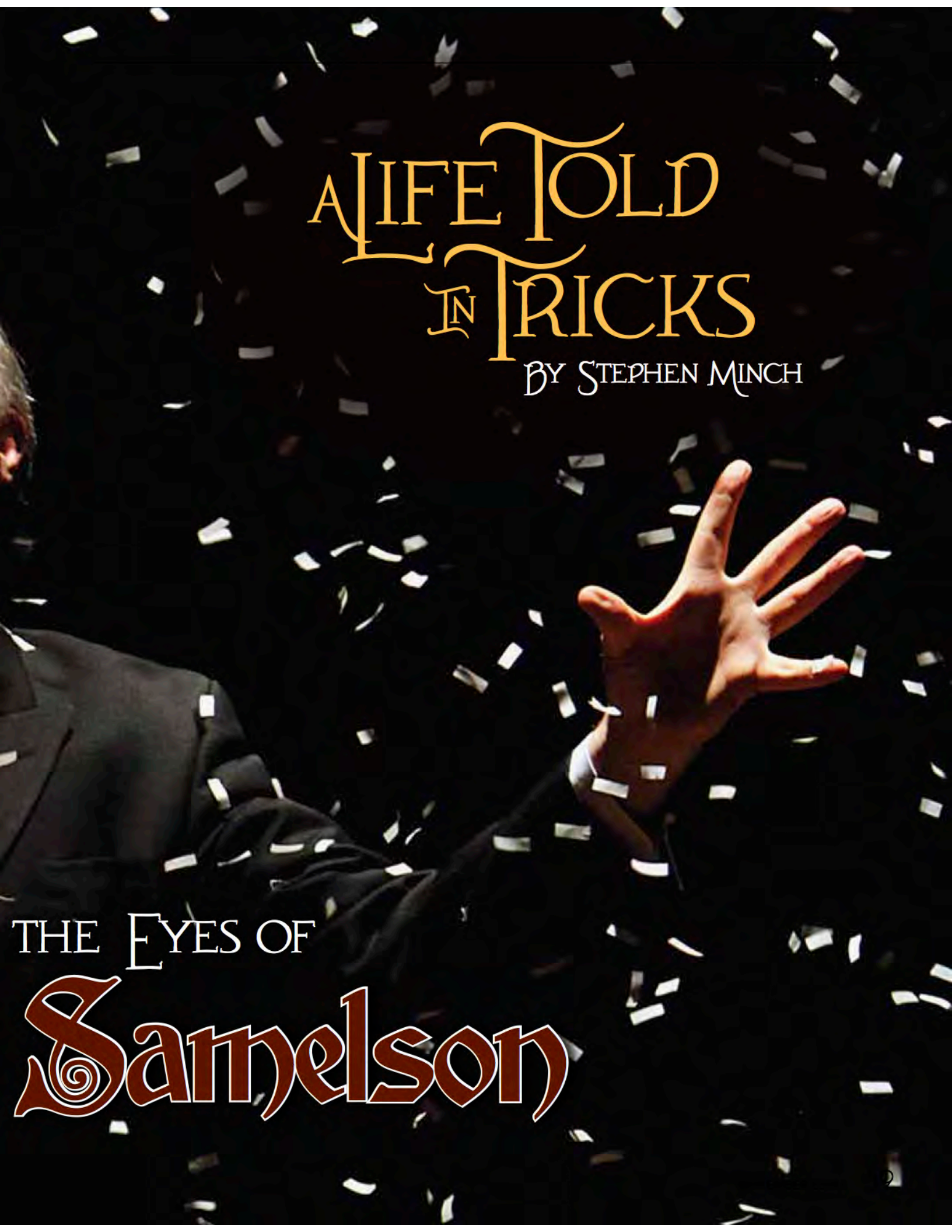
THE CONJURORS' MAGAZINE



Peter Samelson

A man with a mustache, wearing a black tuxedo jacket, a white dress shirt, and a black bow tie, is shown from the chest up. He has his arms raised and a joyful expression, looking upwards. The background is dark, and numerous white confetti pieces are falling around him, creating a celebratory atmosphere.

MAGIC AND THE WORLD THROUGH  
**Peter**



A LIFE TOLD  
IN TRICKS

BY STEPHEN MINCH

THE EYES OF

Samuelson

**When Peter Samelson** APPROACHES A NEW TRICK FOR HIS REPERTOIRE, HE ALWAYS ASKS THREE QUESTIONS OF IT: WHY, WHAT, AND WHO? THESE ARE EQUALLY GOOD QUESTIONS FOR ANY READER TO ASK WHEN EMBARKING ON PETER'S STORY. WE SUBMIT THESE ANSWERS FROM THE FOLLOWING SOURCES.

**RAYMOND CROWE**

*Peter Samelson is one of the few magical artists who made me feel something other than wonder in his performances. For me he has long been the leader into making our Craft an Art.*

**MAX MAVEN**

*Peter Samelson understands how to amaze. His depth of thought and attention to detail are blended with beauty and whimsy—a great combination!*

**TODD ROBBINS**

*Peter Samelson is one of my heroes. By the end of his performance, the audience truly believes in magic.*

**DAVID OLIVER**

*Many have tried to copy him, but none have even come close . . . . Saying that Peter has influenced a generation of magicians is an understatement.*

**ERIC MEAD**

*Peter Samelson does sophisticated, intelligent theatrical magic where the mystery is kept in focus, and the theatrical elements add emotion and relevance rather than detract from the magic.*

These are some of his credentials as assayed by his peers. There are lots more, but you get the idea. Let's now lift the skin of this respected magician and see what makes his heart beat and brain spark.

### THE BIRTH OF THOUGHT

In "The Birth of Thought," Peter Samelson's presentation of the centuries-old "Egg on Fan," he stands beside a large sketch pad on an easel. He is a little wobbly on his feet because he is a toddler. A voiceover issues from the stage speakers:

*Intelligence precedes thought. Even a little baby has intelligence. But when does thought appear? When does the child begin to think?*

*Thought is the use of symbols—using one thing to represent something else—using words.*

*At about the age of 18 months, the child begins to transform raw*



*intelligence into thought. To use symbols and take delight in them. To manipulate ideas as well as objects. And this moment is the beginning of language—that wondrous moment: the birth of thought!*

Peter picks up a large marker and, with an unsteady hand, draws the rough image of an egg on the center of the sketch pad. Smacking his lips at the drawing, he clumsily tears it out of the sheet and, with a look of pleasure, stuffs it into his mouth. But the pleasure quickly dies when he tastes paper instead of an egg.

He spits the paper out into his hand, drops it onto a badminton racket and stares at it, confused and disappointed. He

then begins to play with it, bouncing the wet paper ball on the racket—and he and the audience watch as the wad gradually transforms into an egg.

Peter picks up the egg, cracks it on the rim of a clear goblet and dumps the contents into it.

“Egg!” he proclaims with glee.

## THE EARLY YEARS IN SUMMARY

June 3, 1949, was when Peter first cracked eyes on the world.

This happened in a maternity ward in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His parents, then in their early thirties, were German-Jews who had fled eight years earlier from a Europe bleeding from Nazism. His father had settled into a position at the University of Michigan, teaching mathematics. His mother was a physical therapist.

There was a magic set when Peter was six. When isn't there?

There was a performance by a magician in elementary school. When isn't there?

There's nothing to see here, folks. Let's move on.



## MAGIC INSIDE THE GREAT SOCIETY

After high school, Peter attended Stanford University in pursuit of a degree in physics. After a year, though, he shifted his efforts to theater. During this time, Peter's interest in conjuring almost disappeared. He did design some magic for plays and brought it to the stage while he studied theater. But this was the period of the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements, Lyndon Johnson's paranoia, and the Great Society, all of which resonated with injustices he knew from his family's history. His parents and grandparents had fled from fascism throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leaving behind the lives they had built and starting over again. Because of this, Peter felt a strong social responsibility. Magic, as a light entertainment, focused merely on fooling people and seemed trivial, unimportant.

Later he expressed it this way: "Fooling people was not enough. The government was doing a much better job of it than I could ever hope to. I wanted people to understand *more* about the world at the end of a show, not less. The last thing I wanted to do was to train people to enjoy being fooled, to walk away saying, 'Man that was great. I have no idea how he did that. I like not knowing how things work'."

He felt the need to do something constructive, something that *mattered*. Making the faces of playing cards change or a ring penetrate a rope conveyed no meaning beyond the fact that the magician is able to do it. It would take a few years for him to see past this seeming roadblock to a solution that allowed him to instill social relevance and human connection into his magic—even with a trick as seemingly inconsequential as the "Mutilated Parasol."

## LADY FAIR AND MR. SMOOTH

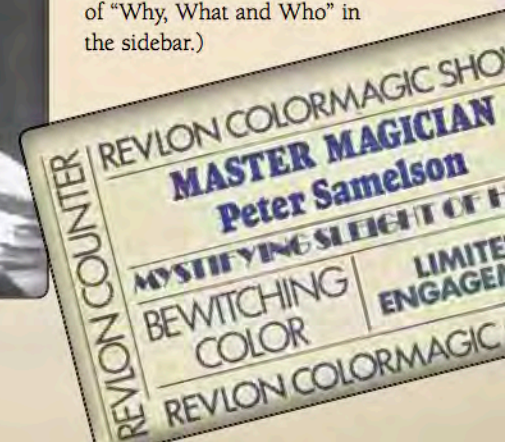
In January 1975, Peter developed this routine for a promotional tour called "Color Magic," developed by the Revlon Company. He was one of three magicians hired: Peter covered primarily the Midwest engagements. Jack Adams handled the East Coast, and Michael Albright the West Coast. Their performances were given in department stores. Peter, Jack, and Michael had large packing cases specially made to transport all the props and sets for their shows. These cases were deliberately made big enough to serve as a raised stage on which they could perform. The setup was pleasing and practical as long as you overlooked the weight. The loaded stage-boxes were extremely heavy.

During the planning stage of the shows, one of the Revlon staff brought an umbrella, the cover of which had been printed with the brand name Chaz, one of Revlon's colognes for men. "Can you do something with this?"

Peter and Jack looked at each other, simultaneously thought "Mutilated Parasol," and said, "No problem."

The Chaz umbrella Revlon had had manufactured for them was not constructed in a fashion that lent itself to any of the standard methods for the trick. Peter and Jack put their heads together and came up with a new method for making the umbrella cover vanish and small silks appear on the tips of the metal ribs. They also made sure the method was angle-proof, as they knew they would find themselves working surrounded. The silks were dyed to match several of Revlon's lipstick colors and were produced from a Genii Tube decorated to resemble a giant lipstick.

Peter desired to give some theatrical heft to the simple transposition of an umbrella cover and scarves, so he drafted two spectators to play out a little melodrama designed to generate spontaneous comedy. As he has long done, once Peter had a central concept in mind, he began to prod at it with the questions Why? What? and Who? as well as analyzing the actions and choreographing them, so that they were natural and betrayed no secret motivations. (See Peter's discussion of "Why, What and Who" in the sidebar.)



# WHY, WHAT, AND WHO?

## A THEORY OF QUESTIONS

BY PETER SAMELSON

There are three questions that form the basis of a performing philosophy. The three questions are really three words. These words can be applied to the entire range of performance in magic. And in their simplicity comes their strength. So let's meet these three little workers. But before we do I have a few thoughts.

Magic, we all seem to agree, has the potential to be an Art (with a capital "A.") And since this is true there are several qualities inherent to magic because it is an Art.

The first is that it is a medium. It is a channel, a conduit. It is a means of communication through which humans share experiences, ideas, and visions. This communication is the ultimate goal, the enviable end of the road.

Second, there are techniques which have grown up within the Art Form. It is not merely a matter of desire which creates art and the artist. Skills must be sharpened and aptitudes developed. For a period of time, the acquisition of technique becomes an end in itself, but as the artist matures, technique is relegated to its proper role ... that of a means to an end.

Third, there are two communities involved in this activity and product called Art. (In truth, there are many communities, including the community of dealers, the publishers, those who fund performances and innovation, those who make news out of it, etc. But here we are, for the sake of usefulness, restricting ourselves to two major communities.) The two major communities are those of the practitioner and the spectator, which come together on those occasions called performances.

Fourth, as this Art communicates through imagery, there will be differences in the meaning of the Art to the two communities. Due to the education of the community of practitioners, it will elicit a different psychological response, as it draws not only from the personal and cultural experiences of the each viewer, but is often tainted, if you will, with the practitioners' obsession of technique.

Fifth, maturity allows an artist the ability to control cultural symbolism which comes to replace the purely personal symbolism of the child.

Sixth, there is a language that exists which allows our community to talk about the Art. This language allows the examination of both the product and the production. This discussion is part of that language.

All this brings us to the need to introduce my friends. A lot of thinking needs to be applied to our performances, to the structure of individual pieces and entire shows. In addition to getting

caught up in thinking about what we do we need to learn how to do it better.

In his book *Spirit Theater*, Eugene Burger pinpoints one of the dangers of performance as "Wobbling." A better description I can't imagine. Eugene shows the way toward effective performances. What we need, though, are techniques which will help us solve the problems he sets for us. That's why I want you to meet my friends.

Here, let me introduce you: What, Why, Who, I'd like you to meet our reader. Dear reader, I'd like to have you meet my three friends and tormentors What, Why, and Who. Let's get introductions out of the way. I'll introduce you to these three inquisitors, but it is up to you to get to know them intimately.

### Why ...

1. *Why am I doing this?*
2. *Why should anyone want to watch this?*

If there is a reason to do magic (fooling people is not a reason, just a technique), then what is it? What does someone have to gain from watching me perform?

### What ...

1. *What is this piece about?*
2. *What would this look like if it were "real magic"?*

Since magic is an imagistic art, and communicates through its symbolism, each piece must have an inherent meaning. What is it? If it is to work as magic, it must look like magic. What would that be?

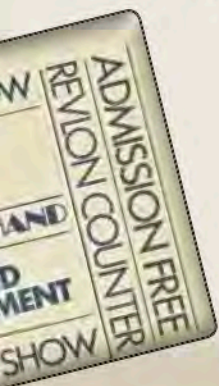
### Who ...

1. *Who are you doing this for, who is your audience?*
2. *Who are you in this presentation, your character?*

The type of audience you perform for determines part of the equation of what your work means. Age range, economic strata, environment all affect what you choose to do where. Know yourself, know your work, know your audience. Who are they? What do they want? And who is the character performing? Wouldn't that affect everything from costume to language?

Spend a little time with these friends of mine. Believe me, they love magic. They will help you. Oh, you may not always be able to answer them, but just the asking of the questions is taking steps in the right direction.

I hope you all get along now. Time for me to go. Let's get together and see some art sometime. •





Then came the scripting of a [stokleiny](#) to cover the required process of the trick. At this stage, Peter brought in Barbara George, a long-time partner and collaborator, who helped to write and direct the piece. The playlet they developed has two characters, Mr. Smooth and Lady Fair, who experience something of a whirlwind romance and begin to contemplate marriage. Dramatic tension arises when Mr. Smooth and Lady Fair discover they have very different expectations of their married roles: who will work, who will raise the children, who will do the housework and cooking.

In a light-hearted way, Peter and Barbara were addressing the often contentious topic of sexual roles, which in the mid-1970s were beginning to change under the pressure of the Women's Rights movement as it became more strident. This controversial subject was unlikely to sit well with a large company like Revlon, whose customers could be expected to adhere to traditional rather than progressive gender models.

But Peter remembered a comment by Norman Lear, the creator of *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, *Mary Hartman*, *Mary Hartman*, and other provocative and highly successful sitcoms: You can get away with saying anything if you sandwich it between two laughs. Peter adopted this approach and found, even in Midwestern and Southern states, he could go so far as to choose a man and a woman of different colors to play the roles of Lady Fair and Mr. Smooth. In doing this, he slipped the idea of mixed-race marriages into the piece, at a time when this idea could be explosive. And he got away with it. He was able to script a magical effect theatrically, so that it conveyed ideas and challenged preconceptions in an entertaining way that was accepted. Magic, through theater, was making a meaningful statement and planting a new thought or feeling into the minds and hearts of at least a few people.







When the Revlon tour concluded, Peter put away “Lady Fair and Mr. Smooth.” But not long afterward he came to see that this routine was not just a specialized number for a single promotion—and he adopted it in his regular stage repertoire, where it has remained, without a significant change in script, for nearly 40 years.

After seeing “Lady Fair and Mr. Smooth” at a New York Magic Symposium in 1987, Jay Marshall said to Peter, “That’s the best presentation of the ‘Mutilated Parasol’ I’ve ever seen.” So there is evidence from the public and the profession that it works.

### BALLS OVER HEAD, OR WHAT AM I MISSING?

Late in his undergraduate years at Stanford University, Peter would occasionally travel up to Cedric and Peter Clute’s Magic Cellar in San Francisco. This was one of the rare nightclubs in the U.S. where close-up magic was spotlighted. It was a small space below a jazz club called Earthquake McGoon’s. Very few spectators could be seated for each performance, as the surroundings did *surround* one snugly. But it was a perfect venue for experiencing genuine close-up magic.

The talent that worked over the years at The Magic Cellar was among the best. It was here one night, during his years at the university, that Peter first experienced the magic of Slydini. The only possible description of this experience was *astonishment*. There were no moves, or at least no evidence of any. All actions were motivated and natural. It was real magic! (Years later, Peter found a simple way of expressing how the motivation of actions could be understood and applied. See his “Three Types of Justification” in the sidebar.)

Slydini had an idiosyncratic style and personality that made it all work. Peter sensed the amazing skill and thought being concealed. Here there was art and craft of a high order. It was

at this show that Peter regained his faith in magic as meaningful performance art.

In theater, there is a chance to change someone’s vision of the world, to expose them to a new idea, to make a life richer, more compassionate, better informed. Suddenly Peter felt that perhaps there was a way to achieve the same goals using magic. A passage in and beyond was opened to him that night.

### HEARTSTRINGS

Many times the right meaning for a trick, the right presentation, is elusive. It may take years to discover. “Heartstrings” was one such piece.

In our lives, we all experience frustrations and failures while struggling toward certain goals. This is particularly true with romantic relationships. Peter knew he wanted to address these feelings of regret and loss, but he hadn’t found the right vehicle for them. After some years, the pieces finally fell into place when one day he looked for the hundredth time at a trick he’d admired since high school, “The Gypsy Thread.”

A thread is something that connects and binds. Yet, it is easily broken. It is a perfect metaphor for the strengths and frailties of human bonds. The breaking of the thread and its restoration speak to everyone’s desire to undo mistakes, to unsay hurtful words, to mend and restore the connection that was cherished and severed.

Peter understood, though, that there is a fine line to walk in bringing personal experience into performance, one that takes finesse and guidance to discover. If the revelation becomes too personal, an audience may grow uncomfortable, feeling they have been made voyeurs, seeing more than they should or wish to see. The personal has to be made universal, so that it doesn’t open a window into just the performer, but a shared window into all of us, from which, it is hoped, we can all see a bit of truth about



ourselves and become a little wiser and more perceptive. It is a delicate challenge to find a formula that makes intimate exposure communicate and resonate with an audience, rather than leave it wincing and embarrassed. The correct balance contributes to good theater. When magic attains it, it can be art. That seldom happens, but Peter's "Heartstrings" successfully walks that line.

### INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS

In 1971, Peter received his bachelor's degree from Stanford. After graduation came a year of touring Europe by auto to further his education in theater and absorb European culture. This traveling included stays with relatives in Switzerland, and occasional performances of magic when the car broke down and funds were needed.

Along the way, Peter made it a point to see other magicians perform. In London, he found Bobby Bernard, Alan Alan, Ken Brooke and Pat Page; and in Amsterdam, Tommy Wonder opened Peter's eyes with a performance of his Wild Card routine, "The Tamed Card." Tommy's innovation showed Peter how one could break away from established sleights and procedures, and how a story, a through line, could support, inspire, invigorate, and intensify the magic. These insights would eventually lead to Peter's own Wild Card routine, "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," in which visitors from *out there* invade a small California town, and social commentary invades card magic.

In the summer of 1972, Peter returned to the U.S. and drove from West Coast to East, final destination: New York City. He was determined to make a living from theater in one of the country's citadels of progressive conjuring and theater. On reaching Manhattan, he quickly began hunting for a job. The first that presented itself involved dressing in a gi with black belt and trying to convince passing strangers to sign up for karate lessons. That lasted a day.

Moving from the ridiculous to American Classic, he next became a Fuller Brush salesman. This proved more successful. His territory was the upscale area of Columbus Circle, and there he worked his way up to being a "master dealer" for Fuller, which involved managing other salesmen as well as making his own sales. The position provided good training. He learned how to approach strangers, how to get past security hurdles and into

## THREE TYPES OF JUSTIFICATION

BY PETER SAMELSON

Often it is necessary to make a specific move or action in the course of a routine in order to satisfy the technical requirements of the effect. In order to justify these actions, magicians have created elaborate schemes and set-ups. I have tried to simplify the thinking in this area by defining the various types of justification, and have discovered three basic categories.

Here then are the three types of justification: logical,

physical, and emotional. They are all interrelated, and yet each is separate and distinct in its application to a specific situation. In order to understand the difference between them it will be easiest to use examples.

It is often the case that a particular instance may involve more than one of the three types. And in fact the distinction may not always be very clear, but in spite of that it is useful to separate them into components. Often the final definition will be a matter of deciding where the greatest emphasis lies.

#### PHYSICAL JUSTIFICATION

During a particular routine, it is necessary to blow smoke under a glass sitting on a table. For the example, I happen to be seated. I use a straw to blow the smoke under the glass. I support myself with my right hand on the table's edge and lean over, placing the straw into my mouth. My left hand tips back the glass and I gently puff the smoke inside the glass. I straighten up and the dirty work is done. In the action of leaning over, I have the opportu-

nity to drop my right hand to my lap and palm a coin, returning it to the table's edge before I finish blowing the smoke.

There are two elements of physical justification in this example. The first is the need to bend over at all. The glass must be kept close to the top of the table or the smoke will escape. I can't physically get the straw under the lip of the glass without bringing it close to the table. This entails bending over and bringing my head close to the top of the table. The second physical element is need for my hand to rest on the table edge. It is obviously needed and stabilizes me as I bend down.

Another obvious example would be a performer who sweeps a handful of coins off a table onto a plate. The plate must go beneath the table because the coins will fall *down*. In the course of this action, an entirely new set of props can be introduced, the coins switched, a load picked up, the list goes on.

The basis of this definition is that the action is motivated by physical laws. I set a glass down on a table, instead of letting go of it in midair, because, if I don't it will shatter on the floor. But what if there are two surfaces I can set the glass down on? Then the choice I make will be determined by another factor. This leads us along the line to ...

#### LOGICAL JUSTIFICATION

Logical justification is invoked when an action is motivated by a logical reason. If I have a choice of two tables, and I look, seeing one is already full, and turn to place the glass on the other table, even though it is further away, my action will be justified by logic, not by physics.

In the classic routine of Card under Glass, there is a moment where the card is loaded under the glass in the process of moving the glass out of the way. The move precedes a spreading of the deck of cards on the table surface. The move goes unnoticed as the action is logical.



The glass is merely moved out of the way so that the deck can be spread.

The classic example in stage magic comes from Cardini. His monocle drops from his eye during the course of billiard ball manipulation. His hand goes to retrieve it and return it to his eye socket. A simple enough scenario, and the action of the hand highly logical. Yet the retrieval of the glass was cover for a brilliant steal of the next ball! The cord on the monocle had been created in the exact length that it hung in the proximity of the bottom of his vest, and the action grabbing the glass was the same one needed to squeeze the ball into his hand.

But what caused the monocle to fall from its place? Yes, physics describes the direction it will travel when it is released, but the cause of the release is what we are seeking. Cardini was surprised! His eyes widened in surprise and the monocle fell away from the orbit. It was an emotional reaction that set up the steal. It was emotion that justified the fall of the monocle.

#### EMOTIONAL JUSTIFICATION

Probably one of the most overlooked forms of justification, yet it is one of the more powerful, contributing to the construction of character and theatrical routining more than the previous and more common other two. It can be used in situations where another method will not suffice, or where the other two rule each other out. Let me explain an example given to me by one of the masters of misdirection, Slydini.

One evening we were sitting after a performance and the subject of difficult moves came up. We were not only limiting ourselves to those that are difficult technically, in a finger busting sort of way, but also those that are difficult to justify making at all. In close-up magic, every one of us has encountered the moment during a Chop Cup routine when it was necessary to jar loose the ball from

its comfortable position in the top of the cup. This was how a master handled the situation.

Tony demonstrated a relatively standard set-up which left the ball supposedly in his left pocket and the "empty" cup mouth down on the table. He said "Now, the ball will travel to the cup. Did you see it go?" Whichever answer he received, he confidently reached over and lifted the cup to show the ball. It, naturally, wasn't there. He was a little confused, then aggravated. "Arghh" he said as he slapped down the cup in annoyance, "this time I'll do it." He gestures between the pocket and the cup and with a sigh of delight and relief, he lifts the cup to reveal the ball.

What carries the moment is his emotion, his being upset that the ball has not traveled, is the very thing that justifies the action of banging the cup on the table and releasing the ball. Yet it is that same emotion that makes the action invisible.

And that is, in the final analysis, the reason we are discussing justification at all. It is the justified move that will be invisible to eyes of the audience. Although the action will be seen, it will not be noticed. It drops back beneath the threshold necessary for notice. In effect, it never happens, or is not associated with an anything tricky or underhanded. It will not be associated with the technique necessary to accomplish the mechanics of the illusion.

There are many more examples of these three types of justified moves, and several combinations of motives. Try watching other magicians and seeing how the actions are accomplished. Notice how unjustified moves stand out like a sore thumb and how those that are covered have a better chance of succeeding. Let me once again stress that structuring the situation for the move correctly is no substitute for executing it correctly! There are no shortcuts here and the demands of both structure and technique must be satisfied. •

offices and apartment buildings—and how to make the sale. Peter eventually became so persuasive, he had to rein in some customers when he felt they were overextending their finances on air fresheners and mothballs.

The Magic Townhouse gave Peter a valuable experimental chamber in which to expand his close-up repertoire. It was there that pieces were developed, such as his “Ring of Truth” ring-and-rope routine, “Cigarette and Thimble,” “Sponge Ball Snacks,” and “The Invasion of the Body Snatchers.” All these and other routines eventually found their way into Peter’s highly respected book, *Theatrical Close-up*, published in 1984.



### MIMETIC SLO-MO SHOW'N APPEARANCE

Peter had entered the eye of a hurricane. He became involved with the young movers and shakers of the New York magic scene. His close friends included Jamy Ian Swiss, Geoffrey Latta, Jeff Sheridan, David Roth, Jack Adams, Mike Gallo, Charles Reynolds, Derek Dingle, Mundaka Lee, Jeff McBride, and Wesley James.

New York offered instruction by some of the theater’s best, and chances to meet and work with the leaders of the avant-garde. When not selling brushes and performing magic, Peter took lessons in voice, mime, movement, and dance at the school run by celebrated choreographers Murray Louis and Alwin

Nikolais, and classes in directing and other aspects of theater at the Improvisational Theater with Sheldon Patinkin of Second City fame. The stage still commanded much of his attention, but magic came to occupy a greater and greater part of his life. The challenge was how to merge these two passions.

The “Mimetic Slo-Mo Show’n Vanish” achieved that sought-after synthesis. In it, Peter eschewed moves for the sake of moves and merged mime, acting, and advanced coin handling into a one-coin routine that offers much more than most coin tricks. It had a rationale, a plot and a character.

After a few years in New York, Peter realized some hard facts about a life in the theater. Most actors in New York worked for free. Only five percent of actors made more than \$5,000 a year from acting, and much of that income came from doing commercials. To get by in their craft, they still had to sell things. Magicians, on the other hand, got paid to do magic.

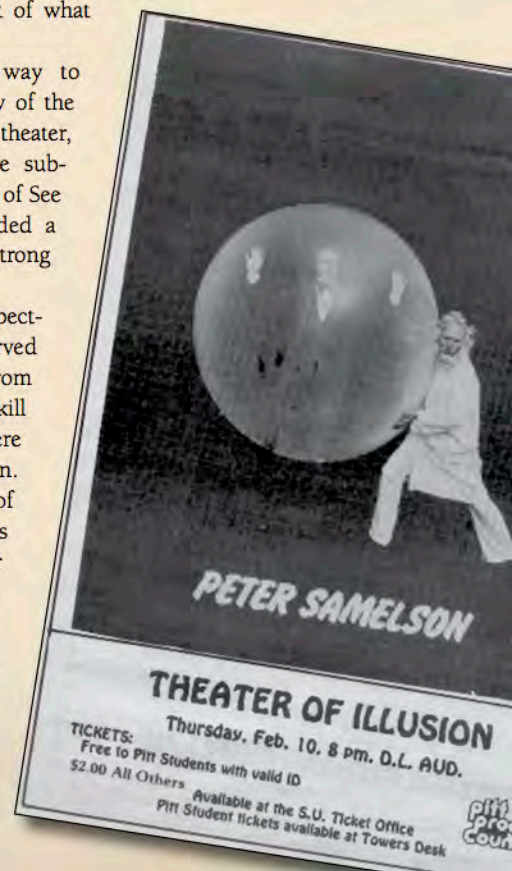
### SNOW GLOBE

Embedding symbolism into the trick called “Snowstorm in China” is far from a new idea. The title alone makes this point. And the Snowstorm is really the last phase of a longer routine from China and Japan involving the story of two courting butterflies who eventually produce a fluttering cloud of paper baby butterflies. It is one trick that seems always to have worn its poetic symbolism on its sleeve.

In the mid-1970s, Vito Lupo, one of New York’s young prodigies, established himself with a mime-magic act in which he played an innocent Pierrot-like character who emerged from a large jack-in-the-box. The Snowstorm was featured in Vito’s act. He did it silently under the accentuation of a follow spot. Peter looked at this staging and admired it. The visual image of the whirling Snowstorm is innately pretty and evocative—but of what precisely?

There had to be a way to enhance the visual quality of the piece with an element of theater, something that had more substance than the thin scrim of See the Pretty Thing. It needed a context to connect it to a strong emotional base.

H.W. Janson, in his respected *History of Art*, observed that what separates art from craft is not the level of skill involved, but whether there is a leap of imagination. Peter turned the effect of “Snowstorm in China” this way and that, looking for some crack into which he could fix a fresh vision. One night he mentioned the problem to Jamy Ian Swiss and Jamy’s wife at





It is a small, perfect moment of visual and emotional beauty combined. It touches audiences deeply and it has closed Peter's shows for years.

## THE FLOATING WORLD

By the late 1970s, Peter's magic performances were making him a far better living than most of the actors he knew. It became clear to him that magic was becoming a viable career, while acting seemed a very weak peg on which to hang one's livelihood. This did not mean that Peter had to abandon theater. He came to see that the path before him led to the incorporation of theater into his magic. In doing that, he could make a good living while still achieving his theatrical ambitions.

Besides his performances around New York, Peter had been developing another venue for his work: college and university shows. He was picked up by Arthur Shafman International, one of New York's most prestigious bookers and producers. Shafman would continue to book Peter into the mid-1990s. This gave Peter a venue for larger audiences, one where his work was featured in the Fine Arts Series along with the likes of Peter Serkin and Housman's The Acting Company.

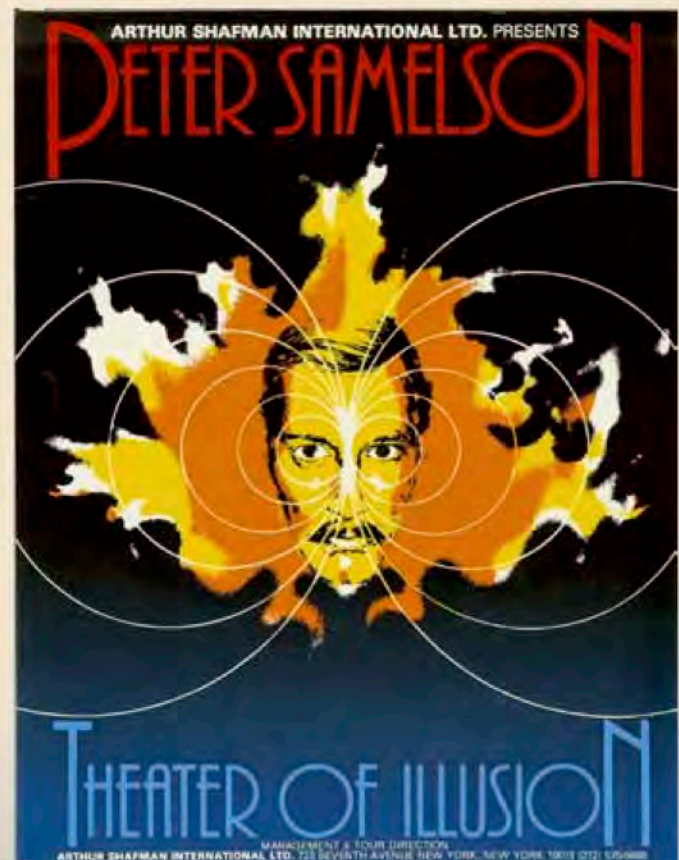
Then, in 1979, came another major break. As part of his normal promotional regimen, Peter sent out information to bookers and agents. When two particular agents showed some interest, he invited them to see him work at The Magic Townhouse. They liked what they saw and asked if he could work on a cruise ship. Peter was flabbergasted. "But you saw what I did here: close-up magic."

"That's all right. You are doing something special, and we think

the time, Wendy. As they lofted ideas back and forth, Wendy suddenly spoke the words, "Snow globe." Peter immediately made a connection with a childhood memory, and eventually a concise script emerged that had all the gleaming transparency of an ice sculpture. He recalled a snow globe his father had kept on his desk when Peter was a boy, and how Peter had always dreamed of getting *inside*.

The yearning to get inside symbolizes the child's desire to enter a parent's thoughts and world, and to experience the serenity and closeness imagined there. The visual image of soaked bits of tissue transformed into a swirl of snowflakes contained, as if in a glass globe, within the narrow column of a single down light, combines with universal desires, creating a moment of pure emotional wonder. It is the leap of imagination, inspired by two words, that revitalized this trick, making it fresh and relevant. While Peter's memory is personal, it communicates with others, exciting shared desires to connect with parents. It was the leap that other fine magicians, when they had seen Peter's snow-globe presentation, recognized as artistically compelling.

Jamy Swiss would later write about Peter's "Snow Globe": "Have you ever seen the 'Snowstorm in China' performed as a speaking piece, accompanied by a powerful story of childhood memories? The originator who served as influence and inspiration to others you may have seen before was none other than Peter Samelson ... ."



we have a place where it will work. Will you consider it?" Peter said he would, but he didn't honestly think anything would come of this. His doubt was so deep, he failed to phone them. A couple of days later they called him. They had a proposition: Would he perform magic on a Holland America world cruise from Los Angeles to Hong Kong?

The answer was an unhesitant yes, and that initial cruise engagement expanded into years of work for Holland America and other major cruise lines. Peter would never again sell a brush, an air freshener, or a mothball. He finally had a career that felt right to him.



Cruises, in a matter of a few years, took him around the world to more exotic and remote ports than the average person can imagine visiting in a lifetime. He found himself performing for poor school children in the Ivory Coast and for royalty and the ultra-rich across the world. With all this came a deeper understanding of the planet and of his fellow travelers on it.

In February 1980, Peter landed in China with the idea of seeking out Chinese magicians and learning from them, as well as sharing what he could. It had been decades since any U.S. magician had entered that country with a similar intent. Other peak experiences occurred in Kenya, Alaska, Sri Lanka, and other distant locations. Before this, he never dreamed his performances would take him around the globe—again and again?

But he did have other dreams, and one was particularly dark.

## THE NIGHTMARE BRIDE

Dreams are a source that would seem fertile for magical effects. But the reality is that the vision that is so compelling during the dream often falls apart or turns trivial when

dragged into daylight. Peter has had only one dream image that entered his repertoire.

One night he awoke from an emotionally racking vision. In a supreme effort to woo back a recently lost lover, he had dreamed he had torn his heart from his chest and offered it to her. She turned away coldly—and his heart shattered in his hand.

The image was so vivid, he eventually recreated it for the stage. In "The Bride," a three-minute vignette performed to original music, he walked down the wedding aisle while animating in one hand an eerie white mask of a woman's face dressed with a bridal veil. The mask-woman rejects him and vanishes from the veil. She then reappears at a small dining table, and Peter tries to entice her back, producing roses and wine. He is again spurned. The wine turns to red sand and, in an ultimate plea, a petal from the roses transforms into his heart. The mask turns away from him, upon which his heart bursts into flame and is consumed. Peter collapses and a pin spot narrows down to the white mask. A tear of blood runs down its cheek. Black out.

In "The Bride," as in all his routines, Peter takes responsibility for the images he presents and the meanings they convey. This is something he feels is an obligation of all magicians. If you shut a woman into a tight box and saw or dismember her, that is—for most of us—a fantasy image. But what does that image communicate? Sadism? Misogyny? Resurrection? Domination? Transcendence? All these meanings are possible. All can be valid. But it takes responsible thought on the part of each performer to decide on the right one.

"The Bride" was a striking series of visuals that wove wisps of Greek drama with surrealism and mime. After a time, though, Peter had to drop it from his repertoire, as it was technically too demanding and the props too cumbersome to transport to his usual venues.

## SCHMOOZING THE BIRTH OF A PRESENTATION

Many, perhaps most, magicians are shy individuals. They feel most comfortable practicing with only a mirror for a companion. After venturing out to perform, they swiftly retreat to their practice space where they are comfortable. Peter recognized early on that, to be successful in magic, you couldn't afford such seclusion.

Peter performed on cruise ships from 1979 to 1996. One thing you learn on these ships, if you are to survive, is how to socialize, how to walk up cold to someone and start a conversation, and how to listen to people. Peter first learned these skills while selling brushes. He honed them further aboard ship, and they have served him well in life and in magic.

As he developed greater and greater skill in interacting with people, Peter discovered he had been given a great tool for developing presentations for tricks. Once he feels he has a good grasp on the mechanics of the method and a fair idea about what the core effect is, he takes these bare bones in front of small audiences to see what reactions they elicit. And he begins to talk extemporaneously about what the effect means to him. All the while, he watches, seeing where an idea or emotion hits home or elicits a response. Peter then uses the clues from each experimental performance to build and lead toward a formal presentation.

### GETTING ABSORBED IN THE SUNDAY TIMES

1986 and 1987 found Peter touring, by ship and on land. Engagements included The Atlanta Harvest Festival, The Bermuda Theater Festival, NEMCON VI, and the New York Magic Symposium.

The Symposium, in 1987, was where Chris Kenner first saw Peter perform. Kenner would later write about this experience. "The first time I saw Peter Samelson I was blown away at how different he was than any other magician I had seen. He spoke well. He treated the audience with respect. He stood up! ... at the time when everyone was tossing things into their laps. In other words, he was way ahead of his time. Watching Peter changed what I thought of performing and helped shape me into whatever I am today."

Magicians were beginning to take notice, as was the New York entertainment world. *The New York Times*, when writing about Peter, referred to him as a "soft-spoken conceptualist of sorcery."

Involvement with the Nat Horne Theater collective led to two Off-Broadway one-man shows, *The Magician* in December



of 1986, and *PaperWork* in October and November of 1987. Peter co-created *PaperWork* with Ted Killmer, a man who would become the spirit that drove New York's biggest street event, the Busker Festival.

*PaperWork* was a significant stride forward for Peter, in which he melded his magic and theatrical presentations into a very distinctive and expressive vehicle. New York theater critic Kevin Grubb wrote: "*PaperWork* is an engaging show ... that falls somewhere between theater of illusion *à la* Doug Henning and socially conscious performance art ... it has moments when the meshing of magic with truth crystallizes into something revealing ... Samelson holds his own as an actor and magician. That's no illusion."

Several fresh pieces were featured in *PaperWork*. Among these was "Getting Absorbed in the Sunday Times." This silent piece grew out of a simple prop gag by Buster Keaton. Keaton, who while reading a newspaper, keeps unfolding it. As he does, the paper expands and expands until it entirely engulfs and entangles him.

In Peter's routine, this is the climax, but beforehand, as he sits in his morning robe, calmly enjoying the Sunday news and a cup of coffee, the stories he reads come to life in the paper, involving him involuntarily in them. The routine is ambitious, comic, and completely original.

The domesticity of the scene in "Getting Absorbed in the Sunday Times" reflected a change in Peter's personal life as well.

In 1986, he got married. This, combined with the difficulty of maintaining channels for land work while spending too much of his life at sea, called for a change in the direction of his career. He soon began looking for ways to develop more opportunities for performance on land and closer to home. Part of this process was a move from Manhattan to nearby New Jersey. Separating himself from his cruise work was a slow and difficult process. It was 10 more years before Peter accepted his last cruise booking.

But by then it was too late. Peter's marriage dissolved in 1992, falling victim, in part, to his peripatetic occupation. The price of this sort of private disaster is not worth the hindsight that may be turned to artistic gain. But when that is what you are given, ignoring it yields only further waste. From this failed relationship and others, Peter mined inspiration and renewed his efforts to create.

### STANDING UP AND LOOKING AHEAD

At the end of Act II of Peter's one-man touring show, *Standing Up and Looking Ahead*, the protagonist, strapped into a strait jacket and overcome by life, collapses to the stage and lies at the edge of the apron throughout a 15-minute intermission. Meanwhile, the stage is struck and life goes on around him. When Act III begins, he rouses himself and manages to struggle out of the strait jacket, so that he can move forward.





# INFLUENCES

## BY PETER SAMELSON

There are influences, don't you know, influences in our lives that shape us and help shape our work. They nudge us, coax us, or sometimes just shove us headlong down a path whose beginning we never chose and whose end is obscure, inevitable, and terrifying. Along the way we gather things about us, acquiring friends, attitudes, beliefs, memories, and the catalogue of our work.

The gentle trap is seduction of technology. Digital bits and bytes that make communication and research so fast that we don't have enough time to view everything. On the Internet we can find many answers, either in text or moving images.

Ephemeral as it is, paper is the vehicle of our immortality. A substance of infinite resolution, requiring no additional power to unlock its contents, paper has the ability to transfix a moment in time, to take it out of time. We assemble our pasts out of the shards of truth, fragmented memories, and half-truths, which conspire to defeat time and lead us to immortality.

*"In order to become famous, one must either do something worth writing about, or write about something worth doing."*  
Benjamin Franklin

Peter had reached a point where he wished to escape the constant demand for travel in order to work. He wanted a career managed from an office, work that could be done without long absences from home, and the chance to sleep in his own bed at the end of the day. He began to construct a new career.

Since high school, Peter had maintained a strong interest in computer programming. In pursuing that interest, he became expert on the Macintosh and Apple systems. In 1993, he and a partner started a "new media" (Web, interactive, and video production) company in New Jersey called Invision Media Communications. Peter assumed multiple duties for Invision: creative director, video editor, coder of software for interactive Websites and CDs.

I always thought that magic was a tool I might use to control life. Did we all? The books clearly defined the extreme technicality of the craft, but I waited for those Johnson Smith & Company packages eagerly, thinking that somehow I could do something that would hurry their transport, expedite their arrival.

*"... Human beings are storytellers, spinners of tales. We gather the complexities of our world into stories ... by constructing narratives that imbue the totality with meaning."*  
Stephen Jay Gould  
(*Natural History Magazine*, May 1995)

Meaning and control; physics and art; vision and the technique to realize it. The creation of magic has its roots in our lives beyond magic. The movement of smoke as it pours from a glass or the picture my mind creates when I close my eyes to a piece of music. It is the shape of language and the remembered smells of childhood; the shattering of a broken heart and the laughter of discovery. It is illumination that comes from insight.

*"A pun is two strings of thought, tied together by a purely acoustic knot."*  
Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*

And thus we tell stories. The truth of the tales is ultimately not subject to an empirical test. It reverberates in the response to the work. I can't do magic, no matter how much I would wish it.

I can only help it to exist. It exists only in the mind of the audience, in that moment of deceit; in the ultimate contradiction.

*"Conjuring is the most honest of all professions, for the conjuror promises to deceive and then does so."*  
Karl Germain

Magic has an essence, a core of imagery. From it we can extract a meaning; from it our audiences do extract a meaning, consciously or not. What informs that central core is the marrow of our cultural iconography. The imagery of a magic effect is the message.

*"What we are called upon to make is not the thing itself but the semblance of the thing; moreover it is for the mind and not the eye that we must produce our effect."*  
Eugene Delacroix; quote on illusion/art

If not cautious, we may fall into a cultural ravine that traps us into an isolation of absolutist values, a myopia of insight. It is the intersection of ideas that produces the footbridge to creativity, not a concrete pathway of fixed ideologies. Humor often emerges from this meeting of disparate ideas. Let it. •

Since Invision was a new and uncertain endeavor, Peter formed a supplementary company, The Magic Source. His partner in this was Hal Meyers ("Dameon"), a fellow cruise-ship magician who shared Peter's desire to disembark from that career. The purpose of The Magic Source was to create and provide corporate performances in the New Jersey area.

In still another entrepreneurial move, Peter and Hal joined forces with Geoff Latta, the New York underground coin and card phenomenon, to develop interactive 3D projects. One of these, centered around magic, was accepted by Apple, but went under when Apple's PIE (Personal Interactive Entertainment) ceased to be served.



Peter and Geoff collaborated on yet another venture, Invisible Systems, a computer consulting service. Even while establishing and building four new companies, magic was never far away. It would pop up in their computer applications and in live performances at trade shows and corporate events, such as Macworld, where they worked a large and elaborate stage presentation for Media 100. There were also occasional non-corporate theater performances and tours. It was a creatively productive and profitable time. It was a stressful time, too.

### NEW COMBINATIONS

In 1997, Peter received a call from Michael Chaut that led to the formation of *Monday Night Magic*, now the longest running Off-Broadway magic show in New York. Guided by Michael, Peter, Jamy Ian Swiss, Todd Robbins, and Frank Brents, *Monday Night Magic* continues to offer weekly performances by local and visiting professionals.

1997 also found Peter fêted as guest of honor at what would become Jeff McBride's last installment of *Mystery School*. An unexpected bit of magic occurred between the various lectures, performances, and ceremonies of the gathering. Peter met Karen St. Pierre. From this chance encounter developed two long-term relationships: one personal, one professional. Karen had become acquainted with McBride while doing graduate studies in mythology. Professionally, she had served as Executive Director of the Omega Institute, Director of Education for the Museum of

Radio and Television, Senior Project Manager for the Grammy Awards, and was an independent producer whose work penetrated to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Barnard College and many other organizations.

That same year, Peter became the magic consultant for one of the earliest, if not the first, of a series of efforts to mount the life of Houdini as a musical. This one, with the plainspoken title *Houdini*, was written by Scott Duffield and James Racheff, and was produced by one of Broadway's favored, Jane Bergere. The production was initially mounted at Goodspeed Musicals in East Haddam, Connecticut. This was another chapter in a side-career that reached back to Peter's years at Stanford; that of magic consultant and special-effects problem-solver for stage plays, television, and films.

With all this going on, things were more than a little mad, but going well. Then came 2003.

### THE PHOENIX— CONFLAGRATION

2003 was not a good year. Peter's mother died, followed two years later by his father. It felt as though the doors to his past had just slammed shut. The door to his future soon did the same. After eight years of successful growth, his video company, Invision, toppled soon after New York's World Trade Center towers.

On September 11, a lot changed, instantly. One of those things was corporate business, which suffered a major financial depression in the sinkhole of an ensuing economic recession. Companies began to cancel various projects or couldn't pay for those in development and production. Peter and Invision attempted to weather this disastrous situation, but after roughly two years of struggling, bankruptcy was the only option. Peter and his investment partner lost everything.

These losses, one after another, were devastating. But loss is unavoidable in life. Things stop. Others start.

### UP IN SMOKE

A few years earlier, Peter had suffered another kind of loss, one far smaller in proportion, but regrettable nonetheless.

"Smoke" is one of Peter's most lyrical, dreamlike pieces. It is entirely original, visually arresting, and symbolically delicate. Once you see Peter do it, you never forget it. Given its originality and power, it is astonishing that other magicians have kept their hands off it. Something other than ethics must be enforcing this, but I've no compelling explanation. It involves smoking, and the taboo of lighting a stick of tobacco within 25 feet of others is now widely observed in North America and much of Europe. But Peter was performing "Smoke" decades before the current social strictures were in force. Maybe, once in a great while, things just go as they should, defying all expectations.

Teaching creativity is a dubious task. Like art, there is a central element of innate inspiration that cannot be bestowed or transferred from teacher to student. Creativity, that leap of imagination, can arrive from many directions. When it comes to finding

the meaning of a magic trick, it may be discovered in the nature of the effect itself, but it is also quite possible to add it.

In the case of "Smoke," the spark of inspiration was produced by two things coming together in Peter's life: stopping smoking and listening to Johann Pachelbel's "Canon."

It may have been the craving for a cigarette that contributed to the vision that came to him as Pachelbel's music played. He felt himself gently drifting and rocking, as if at sea, and he was surrounded by a fog so thick, his hands became lost if held a foot away. The fog permeated everything, slowly, softly. From this image and the feeling of dreamlike drifting, Peter's mind, trained in magic, thought of the old effect of producing smoke in an empty glass. From the smoke, dreams and wishes took vague form, and then solidified.

Peter eventually decided to base the piece that evolved from this vision on the idea of adult toys, things like cigars, alcohol, money. Rolling up a \$100 bill, he takes a drag off a cigarette-sized cigar and gently blows the smoke through the rolled bill to fill a small wine glass. The smoke at first lies lazily in the glass. It then begins to drift and disperse, and something gradually forms, as though from a dream, inside the glass. Eventually it is recognized: a silver dollar. As Peter again fills the glass with smoke, another coin appears in it, and another. Then the coins begin growing larger, until a giant coin dramatically appears from nowhere.

Peter's introductory observations on adult toys is brief. The words soon stop. The piece succeeds on its visual beauty, accompanied by Pachelbel's music.

This is a perfect example of how a captivating image can be creatively coupled to a personal interpretation, one that communicates an idea and a feeling. Magic, reduced to its essence, is the creation in existential reality of an image drawn from our fantasies.

"Smoke" became a favorite piece for Peter and his audiences in the 1970s and '80s. Dai Vernon was quite taken by it. But with the advent of the 1990s, Peter was forced to retire "Smoke," due to the combined change in theater fire regulations and the censure of smoking in public places. Through experimentation, Peter had discovered that the densest smoke is produced by those small cigars the size of cigarettes. It became impossible to light one of these, even for a short time, in performance rooms.

Peter desperately searched for an alternative way to produce the smoke he required for the routine. Punks didn't produce the right type of smoke, and the chemicals traditionally used to create smoke were too hazardous. They certainly could not be safely drawn into the mouth and expelled. So, with deep regret, "Smoke" was retired.

In 2009, while Peter was working with Academy Award winner, Sam Mendes on his productions of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* and Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, the prop master for the company told him about a new type of artificial cigar that avoided run-ins with fire marshals and human smoke-detectors. At first Peter thought he was talking about the old prop cigars that carried a load of white powder to simulate smoke. But, no, what the cast was using was a new electronic cigar that produced a harmless, smoke-like vapor. These were coming from China, and at the time were almost unknown in the West. It would be several years before e-cigarettes became familiar to the general public.

Peter immediately saw this was the answer to reviving "Smoke." After experimentation with different brands of these electronic cigarettes, he found one that produced a smoke almost as dense as that from miniature cigars, and "Smoke" was back in the act.

## THE PHOENIX—UP FROM THE ASHES

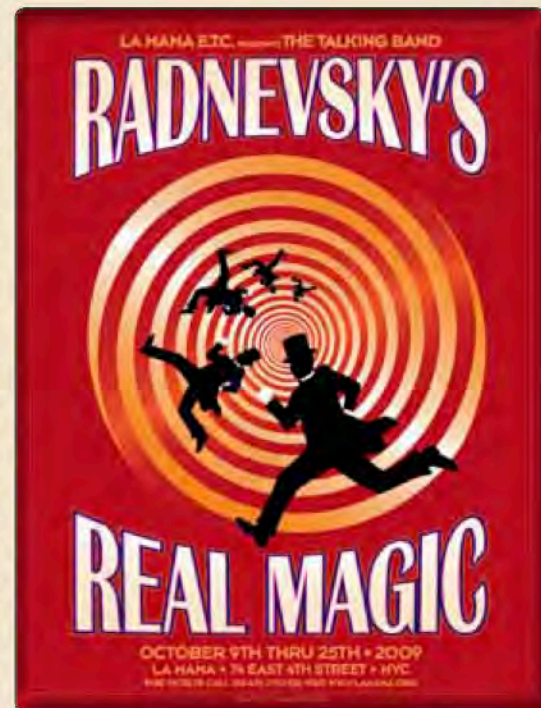
The period ushered in by the 9/11 attack was a black time. But from it bloomed, of necessity, a new career for Peter. While he had never entirely left his performance career, it had been forced further and further to the back of his professional activities. But with the demise of his digital business ventures, it was there again for Peter, waiting to be resurrected. Like the phoenix, Peter Samelson rebirthed himself; which, perhaps not coincidentally, is the subject of another Samelson piece that transforms an old trick, the Burnt and Restored Napkin, into one with new meaning and beauty.

October 2009 saw the opening of *Radnevsky's Real Magic*, Peter's most ambitious and impressive fusion of magic and theater to date. Paul Zimet, a master hand in New York's experimental theater scene, collaborated with Peter and Dennis Kyriakos in writing the script for *Radnevsky's Real Magic*, and then directed it for its production in the First Floor Theater at La Mama ETC, one of the world's best-known centers for avant-garde theater. This show called on Peter to tap every artistic resource he had acquired over his lifetime: magic design and performance, acting, stagecraft, and more.

The premise of the show is the comeback of Anton Radnevsky (Samelson), after a mysterious 30-year absence. Having enjoyed a highly successful career as a miracle worker among New York's *haut monde*, one of Radnevsky's performances turned disastrous when a volunteer from his audience died on stage. From that performance to this, Radnevsky had not been seen. As the story and magic unfold, the relationship and identities of Radnevsky and his protégé, Harry Telkines (Kyriakos), transform as the audience is drawn into a series of darker and darker surprises.

## SOLUTIONS FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE

Peter's involvement with New York theater has been long and fruitful, especially his consultation work when magic and special effects are required in theatrical productions. Charles Reynolds,



the grand old man of magic consultation to New York's theater community, came to see Peter as a talented and resourceful colleague and, during his last years, Charles referred work in this field to Peter.

Besides the collaboration with Sam Mendes already mentioned, Peter has contributed magical effects and coaching for the Tony-nominated musical *Leap of Faith*, and has "animated" the invisible rabbit in the highly successful Broadway revival of Mary Chase's perennial *Harvey*, starring *The Big Bang Theory*'s Jim Parsons, both in 2012.

His expertise is in demand Off-Broadway as well. Recent projects include productions of *Paradise Park* by Charles Mee, and Sam Mendes's cross-Atlantic collaboration with Kevin Spacey, *The Bridge Project*. Consultation work also comes in regularly from regional theaters and units doing national tours, such as the job of creating the magic for Prospero and Ariel in the Bermuda Theater Festival's production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, for the Goodspeed Musicals regional production and national tour of *Pippin*, the McCarter Theater production of Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*, Menotti's *The Consul* mounted by the Glimmerglass Opera, Bard College's production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Sorcerer*, and The Paper Mill Playhouse productions of *Carnival* and *Godspell*.

Outside this theater work, Peter manages a full performing career that encompasses corporate presentations, private functions, television, and the occasional return to cruise-ship work.

## THE LOVELOCKS

As part of all this, Peter continues to evolve new performance material. At times the struggle to find the Why, What and Who of a trick proves especially elusive. For 30 years, Peter searched for a presentation of Joseph Kolar's classic lock-and-key mystery, commonly referred to as "Seven Keys to Baldpate" or (even less precisely) as "Key-R-Rect." Many have searched for a motivation that makes finding the right key matter to the audience. In an early attempt at this, Peter chained a woman to a microphone stand while her partner fended off suitors to end up with the key that would release her. In his show *PaperWork*, the feat became the "Sort of Damocles." The lock kept Peter safe from being struck by a huge bundle of critical reviews suspended over his head, while audience members played the roles of various New York critics.

There were other presentations.

Then one day, Karen St. Pierre pointed out to Peter an article in *The New York Times* with a photo of a bridge in Italy, festooned with locks, placed there by lovers. This became the needed metaphor. The effect became a quest to find the right key to open your partner's heart, a key that cannot be tossed into the river, no matter how enticing the symbol of the lock on the bridge might be, because that key is needed every day. And each night on stage, a husband once again kneels before his bride after she has unlocked her heart for him.

Peter is still producing and regularly headlining at Off-Broadway's award-winning *Monday Night Magic*, and finds opportunities to perform and lecture at magicians' conferences around the world. Recent Samelson sightings have occurred at the Genii 75th Anniversary Bash, the 2013 national convention of the I.B.M., Magic in the Rockies, the Cape Cod Conclave, the International Magic Convention in London, and Shenanigans in Dublin. He recently received the Merlin Award for Lifetime Achievement from the International Magicians Society, and he is currently collaborating with Bill Abbott to make some of Peter's signature routines available to magicians.

Peter Samelson continues to transform his life into the art of his magic. He hasn't just rebuilt his career. He has invented a greater one, radiating from a central core: the elevation of magic to a theatrical experience, on stage and close up, while always reaching for that elusive brass ring. Art. •

