

The Patter Debate

Years ago there was a discussion between Richard Kaufman and Eugene Burger debating whether it is best to use patter as written or to create one's own script. This was my commentary...

Are most magicians capable of making the choice?

I think not. In this debate, both Richard and Eugene have made a basic assumption, which drives the debate, and leads to arguments, which seem rational yet fail to address the essential question. The undisclosed assumption is that magicians, both creators of the patter and performers, are a talented, skilled, uniform group, for which a rule can be devised.

While both Richard and Eugene are skilled and talented performers and/or writers, most magicians don't share their advantage. So, while being an ardent proponent of originality in performance and effect, my position in this debate depends entirely on the particular combination of performer and patter.

Richard argues to preserve the pre-written word on the conviction that the author's text will be superior to that created by the individual performer. While Eugene is predisposed to the belief that searching for text sparks creativity, activating the imagination. The new text will be more appropriate, better suited to the performer and thus superior. I believe that, risky as it may be to take this position, most magicians are not adequately prepared to make this choice. Their job is complicated by the fact that.

Most patter is not script.

Although Richard's metaphor of magic show as musical cabaret act is useful in understanding that a performer may weave together effects created by different authors into a coherent evening, the parallel of Magic and Music must be carefully extended. For, honestly, few magic routines are crafted so that the text and visual aspects are interlocked in the way words and music are in popular songs. Still, consider that there are routines in which text and visual are part of a larger whole. And in those cases, for just a moment, consider the parallel, the vanity of creating your own words to "Let it Be," "My Girl" or "Summertime."

The truth of the matter is that most patter is expedient. It is generated to encompass a visual illusion or trick. There is no reason for the patter other than technical functionality; it does not serve to inform the illusion. In these cases, writing a script is required.

Yet, if one is lucky, there is text that has been refined over the years, honed to a cutting edge by the performances of a working performer, not contrived to accompany a newly conceived series of moves. In these cases the script must be treated with respect, for it works with the visual effect in the same way that words and melody become one in a song.

If it is Script, it must be considered.

This not to say that there is only one script per effect, but all must address the visual imagery. Look at the Gypsy Thread. Both Eugene and I have routines, in which the text is a vital part of

the performance experience. They are radically different, yet each utilizes the imagery of destruction and restoration; each searches for a meaning through which the viewer and performer can connect, and in each, the words are essential to the ultimate effect. We wrote these pieces for ourselves, and yet clearly another performer might successfully use the scripts as written.

If the text is rejected, the replacement must serve the Magic and Performer.

The other side of this coin is that many magicians don't have the training or even the interest to create original, exciting, and/or important scripts for themselves. Rather, they are (back to the Kaufman paradigm) the performing equivalent of bands playing cover tunes at Bar Mitzvahs, not original artists in concert. There is a lot of good paying work at Bar Mitzvahs.

If a performer chooses to replace a script, it should not be undertaken lightly. Discard a text for a reason, not because it has been crafted by another hand. I don't make all my own props, just when it can be made to better suit my needs or when what I need is not available. It seems easier with scripts, and certainly the process is an invaluable tool for self-discovery. Most people, given the proper tools, can write scripts for their work that are a lot more powerful than the prepackaged variety. Like the technical part of the art, the skill for this must be studied and learned with an equal amount of thought, energy and commitment.

What tools are available to make these judgments?

There is thus no governing rule that can be applied to all situations; use the patter or create your own. Rather a procedure is indicated, a tool required. We need a way to evaluate the script and determine how we should respond. But first, a concept.

Within every Magic effect there lays a hidden meaning, contained within the visual/aural experience of the illusion. Discovered by exploration, it is not predetermined or unalterable. While the visuals determine the context for the meaning, the exact interpretation of the imagery and its implications are the playground for the writer/performer. The range of possible presentations is great, although the subject of the imagery must be addressed.

By asking questions about the script and the imagery of the effect, the performer can begin to make an informed choice about the appropriateness of the patter.

- 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, and 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?

When there are scripts, there will be Art.

When magicians understand that magic, as a theatrical experience, requires crafting in all aspects, then there is a chance for a quantitative improvement in the art. If words are a part of an illusion, they must be chosen and rehearsed with as much care as the choreography of the body, hands and props. When a quality script is discovered, its appropriateness can be evaluated with tools which provide a handle to understanding the effect and its presentation. By thinking about the patter with a goal in mind, not a prejudice, we create artists, not parrots nor pretenders. Choose by thought, not dictum.