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A Fundamental Mistake

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In a recent *Museletter*, I peeled back the veil to share “A Fundamental Secret” about performing. In brief, my secret was a mantra I had learned from over twenty years of performing in the real world: “The fundamental business of every magic show is *relationship-building*.”¹

I am deeply gratified by the positive response this essay received from readers all over. And it has encouraged me to extend my reflections this month by sharing what I have come to see as a fundamental error in magic. I believe this mistake, this error, is so widespread and has such negative consequences that if magicians everywhere would resolve themselves to avoid it, the general reputation of magic would rise a hundred-fold. Here is the principle that’s so easy to forget:

Perform from the center of your skill set, not the edges.

Indeed, as I watch magic—by professionals and amateurs alike—I see this mistake over and over: performers attempting something that is simply too difficult for them. Their hands shake, their techniques flash, their eyes are turned inward; there is tension in their hands and body and too much thinking. And the experience of magic leaks out of the tank.

How does this happen? Why does it happen so much? I believe a big part of it is a myth that runs pretty deep in our magic subculture: the notion that a trick gets better and more praiseworthy the harder it is. And along with this idea comes the further notion that magicians are measured by their technical skill level. (“My sleight is bigger than yours!”) Never mind that their Pass doesn’t “pass” because it flashes, that their fingers flutter when they Cull, that anyone with eyes can tell two cards are being turned over as one, that everyone knows *something* happened right there.

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May I say the emperor has no clothes? May I offer the following suggestion to unsettle this pervasive myth of technique? I would say that the measure of a trick is how invisible the secret is, and the measure of magicians is whether they *truly* astonish and delight their audiences with the things they perform.

Of course, sleight-of-hand is part of the game. While it is true there is excellent magic that's sleight-free (for example, *BEKOS*, *B'Wave*, and many things created by the amazing Wayne Dobson), sleight-of-hand is such an important part of our tool kit that it behooves those of us who are temporarily abled to spend a good deal of time in that playground. But again, in my view, here is how that time should go: "Practice at the edges of your skill set, but only perform from its center." Never fear: with time, loving attention, and regular practice those difficult skills at the edges will find their way into the center and your range will expand. But there is no reason to sit by the sidelines while you wait. As Eugene Burger constantly reminded our students at the Magic & Mystery School: "There is *excellent* magic at every skill level."

Do you feel what a difference committing to the center would make to your confidence? Do you see how leaving the too-hard stuff at home (for now) will empower your performance and your ability to build audience relationship? What pieces are you attempting in public that aren't really, honestly in the dead center of your skill set?

I promise you: everything about magic performance gets better and more fun—for our audiences, too—when we perform from the core of our confidence, rather than at the shaky, uncertain, self-absorbed edge of disaster.

Note

¹ "A Fundamental Secret" first appeared in the February 2015 *Museletter*. A revised version was published in my *Inspirations: Performing Magic with Excellence*, pages 161-163.