



THE BUZZ

AMSTERDAM MAGIC SOCIETY



Giancarlo Scalia
lecture, live at Café
De Buurvrouw.
Wednesday
November 20 @ 8.00
PM

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2024

ISSUE 11

1/ FRITZ WITH A Z

Michael Vincent and I recently had a wonderful time at the Johannesburg Magic Circle's Sapphire Convention. It's a friendly gathering with a warm, welcoming atmosphere. I can hardly believe it has been nine years since I last visited South Africa!

3 p.



4 p.

2/ GIANCARLO SCALIA LECTURE



Giancarlo is an Italian magician and actor based in Madrid. Since starting his magic journey as a child, he has developed his interest in the performing arts by learning various circus disciplines and continues his artistic training by studying physical theatre and mime in Italy and Spain.

3/ MAGIC ALL FESTIVAL, SPA FRANS DE GROOT

From September 11 to 15 „Cie Alogique, the Royal Cercle Magique Liégeois "Les 52" and the Centre Culturel Spa-Jalhay-Stoumont organised an international magic festival in Spa.

6 p.



4/

5 p.



PETER SAMELSON LECTURE GANDALF

On October 2 Peter Samelson gave a lecture on his work and thinking in Café De Buurvrouw in Amsterdam Centre. Due to a somewhat limited capacity the maximum number of attendants was capped at 20.

This magazine is a production of the Amsterdam Magic Society. If you like to contribute, send this to our editor & designer, Frans de Groot: amsterdammagicsociety@gmail.com

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DEAR READER

Michael Vincent and I recently had a wonderful time at the Johannesburg Magic Circle's Sapphire Convention. It's a friendly gathering with a warm, welcoming atmosphere. I can hardly believe it has been nine years since I last visited South Africa! The reception was incredible—the attendees were enthusiastic, eager to learn, and truly passionate about the art of magic. It's always a joy to give back to the magic community, and this was no exception.

On Friday evening, Mike and I performed a show for the attendees, which was followed by a screening of [Lost in The Shuffle](#), a fantastic documentary where FISM-winner Shawn Farquhar travels the world seeking the historical origins hidden in a deck of cards. The film also features incredible magicians like Richard Turner, Alexandra Duvivier, Juan Tamariz, and of course, Michael Vincent.

Saturday was filled with insightful TED-style talks on topics ranging from app-based magic to the business side of our art. That evening, we enjoyed a gala show featuring two performers from the College of Magic, and I had the honor of closing the show—what a thrill!

Sunday morning began with an improv exercise, where our team (Team Orange!) won first place, with chocolates as the prize. In the afternoon, there was a panel talk where Mike, David Gore (director of the College of Magic), and myself discussed a variety of magical topics.

In the evening, I performed a different act during another gala show, which was an equally exciting experience. In between, I also had the chance to sample local food and drinks—South Africa truly knows how to make you feel at home!

Speaking of feeling at home, we also held our very first online meeting recently, and it was fantastic to see so many members there. Our next one is on October 27th, and I hope even more of you can join us.

Lastly, Peter Samelson wowed audiences at the Amsterdam Magic Show with an energetic, entertaining, and magical performance. His lecture the next day was just as inspiring, and you'll read more about it in this issue.

Enjoy reading!

Fritz with a Z



LECTURE GIANCARLO SCALIA

Giancarlo is an Italian magician and actor based in Madrid. Since starting his magic journey as a child, he has developed his interest in the performing arts by learning various circus disciplines and continues his artistic training by studying physical theatre and mime in Italy and Spain.

Thanks to his constant study of movement, his clean handling, sensitivity and gestural expression truly stand out from the crowd. His magic is characterized by its simplicity and ability to transmit the maximum through the minimal, expressing ease and flow through refined technique. His performances are full of humour, mystery, and the beauty of the impossible.

If you have seen Giancarlo's magic, you know that his gestural ability is extraordinary. In this lecture Giancarlo will show you his conception of magic and his way of interacting with the elements, which is based mainly on natural, economical movement. He will teach you how to redesign your tricks and techniques obtaining maximum results with minimum effort. An encounter not to be missed!

[The lecture](#) on November 20 is limited to 20 seats. Once we've reached this number, we'll put you on the waiting list. To ensure your seat for this lecture, a payment of €5 is required for AMSociety members and Apprentices.

Non-members pay €25.



SHOW RICO WEELAND

Embark on an enchanting journey with Rico Weeland as he unveils the long-guarded secrets of magic, hidden away for generations. Prepare to be captivated as these elusive wonders are brought to life before your eyes.

Step back in time to meet the key players who shaped magic into the mesmerizing art form it is today. With Rico as your guide, immerse yourself in the profound passion and dedication rarely witnessed in this craft. Join us for a seamless blend of past and present, crafting an unforgettable experience that will leave you both inspired and enchanted.

Rico is performing on December 12 at [Mascini, Amsterdam](#).



Peter Samelson Lecture

On October 2, Peter Samelson gave a lecture on his work and thinking at Café De Buurvrouw in Amsterdam Centre. Due to somewhat limited capacity, the maximum number of attendants was capped at 20. Thus, no empty seat was left. A collateral benefit was that the lecture was very intimate and felt almost like private tuition. Peter resides in New York, where he frequently performs at Speakeasy Magick, a small posh venue where, in 1.5 hours, 10 close-up magicians show their skills in separate blocks, interlaced with several stage acts. The entrance price is, by Dutch standards, rather steep, but reportedly one gets a lot of value for their money. Additionally, why lower your prices when the place is packed every evening, and that without any formal advertising? N.B. I consider myself “word of mouth” as informal advertising.

Peter first showed us several of his pet effects, which all form part of his regular act in New York, and later – very generously – explained not only the workings but also the thinking and theory behind them. Why he chose certain parloando, little tips on misdirection, and the choreography of the effects.

The effects altogether were (purposefully so) highly varied, no pipe dreams here (real “workers”). Time and audience tested: the Phoenix napkin with “traveling ashes,” Peter’s version of the Wild Card (with thanks and credit to Tommy Wonder’s “Tamed Card”), a well-constructed rope & ring routine with a “killer ending,” finishing with Jon Allen’s “Double Back” (still considered one of the most visual and commercial tricks in card magic), and an astonishing card effect where the signature of the great magi and the spectator on two different cards both, in the end, transfer (“merge”) to the spectator’s card (“New York Transpo”). One might say that the AMSociety population consists of highly seasoned (many of them professional)



magicians, but in particular, the last effect caused a lot of roars, exclamations, and applause.

Peter weaved his explanations together with theoretical exposés: the Why, What, and How. The three basic questions we should ask ourselves when studying and practicing new effects. This exercise will also help you when finding and further fine-tuning the associated parlando (personally, I eschew the usage of the word “patter”). Eric Mead appeared to be an important source of inspiration for Peter in this regard: the magic happens in the spectator’s mind, aided by what they witness or think they see.

The evening ended with a vivid Q & A, which I personally could not attend until the end due to my travel schedule. Being the happy owner of Peter’s lecture notes, I am determined to sit down shortly at ease and relive the experience of this evening once again. Personally: “I cannot wait” and look forward to this! Also, I am determined to go (re)find Peter’s book in my magic library, a small gem that easily got lost in the shuffle.

Peter, once again, thank you for kindly sharing the decades of experience you’ve gathered through your journey in the wonderful and ever-inspiring world of magic. This night was not only your world but – once again – also made it ours, over and over. Many thanks from this place, and wishing you all the best in magic. Keep enjoying!

TEXT: GANDALF

PHOTO: FRANS DE GROOT



From September 11 to 15, Cie Alogique, the Royal Cercle Magique Liégeois "Les 52," and the Centre Culturel Spa-Jalhay-Stoumont organized an international magic festival in Spa.

It was overwhelming, with 10 lectures, 2 workshops, 5 shows, and an after-party with free beer and fries. Because I had seen some lectures before, I had some time to visit the dealer hall and the beautiful little city of Spa.

For me, the convention's highlights were Artem Shchukin, Rubi Ferez, and Mario Lopez. Mortenn Christiansen, David Stone, Markobi, and Kurt Demey had great success, but as I had seen them before, the surprise was gone.

The gala show was held in a beautiful theater, completely sold out with magicians and laypeople. It was presented by Norbert Ferré. The artists we saw were World Handling Champion Artem Shchukin, Jaana Felicitas with a dance and magic act with a dancing chair, and Doble Mandoble with an illusion act. They are European champions, but I don't know why. World champion Laurent Piron did his FISM act, but now with an assistant or girlfriend (I don't know how they are connected). She started with the FISM act of Laurent, and after that, he showed us some new tricks with paper and cardboard boxes. Incredible!! Thank you all; it was a perfect show. After that, we enjoyed an after-party with free beer and fries. What else could you expect in Belgium? Usually, lectures at conventions are for magicians who want to learn tricks and techniques. Of course, there was a lot to learn in Spa, but the organizers added some lectures with a different approach. So first, Xavier Tapias from Barcelona explained all his knowledge of automation and automata

applied in magic. This is an excellent opportunity to enter this wonderful world of electronic automata. He is a master in this discipline.

Laurent Piron and Hugo van de Plas's lecture was called "Build your own magic." They explained how to build a FISM act. But the best part of this lecture was their knowledge of how to hide the "invisible thread" with the use of stage lighting. Well done!

Jaana Felicitas's lecture was about movement and magic. Techniques she learned as a professional dancer can be adapted to a magic act. So count in your act to eight, like a choreographer does; fourth wall or no fourth wall; how you find your stage persona. It was a very inspiring experience!

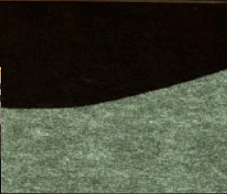
There was no close-up show, but a parlour show with close-up performers. With good camera work and a screen, it was easy to follow. In this show, Rubi and Mario Lopez did a very funny act where Mario could stop Rubi's performance with a transmitter. Double the Magic, Fritz with a Z would say.

The convention was closed with the "Opera pour Sèche-cheveux." Every scientific law is reinvented in the service of circus and exploit, and magic intervenes when rationality runs out of steam. Very original!

In the evening, I saw (at extra charge) the show "Confettis" by Jérémie Reners. There are many magicians who don't say much, and there are very few comedians who do magic. Jérémie did both very well!

The organizers, Hugo Van de Plas, Laurent Piron, Renan Frisée, and The Compagnie Alogique, did a great job. It is not only a convention for magicians on Saturday and Sunday for a ridiculously low price of €149, including a free brunch on Sunday, but also, from Wednesday through Sunday, all kinds of magic shows for laypeople!

TEXT AND PHOTOS FRANS DE GROOT





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International Club Night

Hello Everybody!

I want to thank everyone who joined us last month for the first-ever International Club Night. The next one will come on October 27th—just in time for Halloween! In fact, spooky magic will be on order for the night. Coming on the 31st here in Amsterdam, the Amsterdam Magic Show will produce the second annual 'Rose Seance Experiment.'

The cast will be available to chat, discuss how we created the show, answer questions, and more. Edgar Brumaire, the show's medium, will also discuss his bizarre magic outside of the seance room.

In addition, we will have special guests and time for members to show off effects as usual. This month, we will have it on Zoom, so when it is time, you can check <https://zoom.amsterdammagicsociety.com>, which will bring you to the meeting page.

I'm looking forward to seeing you all there!

This meeting will again be open to magicians even if they are not yet members of the society, so please invite your friends.

Evan Kastor

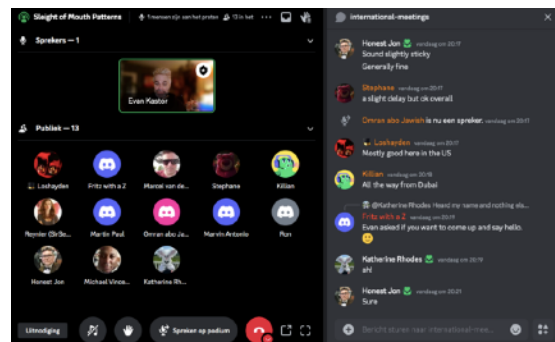
HUGE THANK YOU for an Amazing International Club Night!

A massive thanks to everyone who joined us last night for our very first International Club Night on Discord! It was incredible to see magicians from all over the world come together to connect, share tricks, and just have a great time!

A special shoutout to all the guests from three continents and new faces who joined us – we hope you enjoyed the Sleight of Mouth program and had fun hanging out with our members.

We're so excited to make this a monthly tradition and can't wait to see even more of you at our next virtual meetup! Don't forget, we'll be back the last Sunday of every month, and of course, we're still holding our regular in-person meetings at Mascini.

Thank you for making the night unforgettable, and let's keep the magic alive!



Fritz with a Z



Secrets of the Magus

Ricky Jay does closeup magic that flouts reality

Part 3

Jay does not regard “amateur” as a pejorative. His two most trusted magician confidants are Persi Diaconis, a professor of mathematics at Harvard, and Steve Freeman, a corporate comptroller who lives in Ventura, California. Both are world-class sleight-of-hand artists, and neither ever performs for pay. Jay extolls them as “pure amateurs in the best sense.” The distinction that matters to Jay is between “good” magic and “bad.” Magic “gives me more pleasure and more pain than anything else I’ve ever dealt with,” he says. “The pain is bad magicians ripping off good ones, doing magic badly, and making a mockery of the art.” One specific locale that he steers clear of is the Hollywood Magic Castle, a club whose membership consists of both amateur and professional conjurers. On a given night, one can see a great performer at the Magic Castle,

but all too often the club is a tepid swamp of gossip, self-congratulation, and artistic larceny—a place where audiences who don’t know better are frequently fed a bland diet of purloined ineptitude. Many years ago, Jay had an encounter there that he describes as typical.

“A guy comes up and starts telling me he’s a fan,” he recalls. “I say thank you, that’s nice to hear. He says he used to see me perform in Boulder, Colorado. That’s nice, too, I say. Then he starts talking about this wonderful piece I did with a mechanical monkey—really one of the most bizarre routines I ever worked out—and I thank him, and he says, ‘Yeah, I get a tremendous response when I do that. Audiences just love it.’ And I say, ‘Let me ask you something. Suppose I invite you over to my house for dinner. We have a pleasant meal, we talk about magic, it’s an enjoyable evening.

Then, as you're about to leave, you walk into my living room and you pick up my television and walk out with it. You steal my television set. Would you do that?' He says, 'Of course not.' And I say, 'But you already did.' He says, 'What are you talking about?' I say, 'You stole my television!' He says, 'How can you say that? I've never even been to your house.' This guy doesn't even know what a metaphor is. People ask me why I don't do lectures at magic conventions, and I say, 'Because I'm still learning.' Meanwhile, you've got people who have been doing magic for ten months and they are actually out there pontificating. It's absurd."

T. A. Waters, a mentalist and writer, who is the librarian at the Magic Castle, told me, "Some magicians, once they learn how to do a trick without dropping the prop on their foot, go ahead and perform in public. Ricky will work on a routine a couple of years before even showing anyone. One of the things that I love about Ricky is his continued amazement at how little magicians seem to care about the art. Intellectually, Ricky seems to understand this, but emotionally he can't accept it. He gets as upset about this problem today as he did twenty years ago."

At some point within the past twenty years, Jay asked Dai Vernon—a.k.a. the Professor—how he coped with affronts of this sort, and Vernon replied, "I forced myself not to care." "Maybe that's how he lived to be ninety-eight years old," Jay says.

Jay's admirers invariably dwell upon his technical mastery—what is known in the trade as "chops." According to Diaconis, he is, "simply put, one of the half-dozen best card handlers in the world. Not maybe; everybody thinks so." Diaconis and Jay were casual acquaintances as kids on the New York magic scene during the fifties, then lost track of each other for several years, in part because Jay deliberately exiled himself from the mainstream magic world.

They reestablished contact twenty-odd years ago, after Diaconis caught one of Jay's

appearances on the "Tonight Show." By then, Jay had honed an out-of-left-field brand of gonzo-hip comedy magic, a combination of chops and antic irreverence. Often, he would begin a performance by demonstrating a not easily marketable skill that eventually earned him a listing in the "Guinness Book of World Records": throwing a playing card for distance. A properly launched card would go ninety miles an hour. Unobstructed, it could travel a hundred and ninety feet. From ten paces, it could pierce the outer rind of a watermelon. After impaling the flesh of a watermelon with a card, Jay would rifle one card after another into the exact same spot. He also used a plastic chicken and windup toys as props and targets, often inflicting disabling injuries. His patter was voluble, embroidered with orotund, baroque locutions; he would describe the watermelon rind, for instance, as the "thick pachydermatous outer melon layer." In a memorable routine, the "Laughing Card Trick," which involved no words at all, Jay showed his hands empty and then produced cards one at a time, along the way building suspense with cackling laughter. Each time he produced a card—somehow, it was always a jack of spades—he gripped it with his lips. After doing this maneuver four times, he removed the cards from his mouth and revealed that—voilà!—they had become the four aces. Next, he would do spirit-writing on a tortilla. Downshifting, he would segue to "The Four Queens," a minuet like Victorian parable in which the four face cards representing "the feminine portion of the smart set" were "besieged" by "suitors from the lower orders." In other words, each of the four queens was grouped with three numbered cards. "Ladies and gentlemen," he would announce, "as you have seen, I have taken advantage of these tenderly nurtured and unsophisticated young ladies by placing them in positions extremely galling to their aristocratic sensibilities." Somehow, the queens must "find each other's company"—that is, transport themselves so that what remained would be three groups of four numbered cards and a quartet of queens. This Jay accomplished in a manner so simple,

natural, and miraculous as to render prestidigitation invisible, thereby raising the strong possibility of divine intervention.

Jules Fisher, the theatrical-lighting designer and a friend of Jay's, told me, "Ricky will look into any effect and find the side of it that is inherently magical. He doesn't present magic as a challenge—as a matter of 'Look, I can make this disappear and you can't.' Rather, he wraps it in a dramatic plot. In many of his tricks, there are stories. In 'The Four Queens,' the cards take on personas, which is much more impressive than the question of how that card disappeared."

Michael Weber has a vivid memory of seeing Jay execute "The Four Queens" fifteen years ago on a network-television special with Doug Henning as host. "It was a transcendent moment in popular magic," he says. "Ricky had attitude, presentation, humor, and chops. Everybody was talking about that show. It was one of those times when all the elements of his talent were so self-evidently on display that even the people who could never before get it finally got it." Dai Vernon once saw Jay perform "The Four Queens" live, during a lecture-demonstration at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, at the University of California at Los Angeles. Afterward, the Professor told his disciple that the entire performance "restored dignity to the art of magic."

"The magical aspect of Ricky is very strong," Diaconis says. "It's one thing to see someone who is very skillful with cards and quite another to witness an effect and have just no idea what happens. With Ricky, it's very hard to isolate technique from performance. I can sense when a sleight has happened and how it happened, but I still don't see it. I just feel it intellectually. When Ricky is doing one of his poetical pieces, he's working in his own unique venue. He's mixing disparate things—quirky scholarship, iconoclasm, technique, a good story—into some soup that works. Because he picks good, strong tricks and makes them come to life, in the end there's this basic simplicity about what he does. Before Ricky came along, there had been comedy

magicians, but never ones who really fooled people. And you can see the consequence—there are a dozen people now working in night clubs doing Ricky Jay acts. But none of them are Ricky Jay."

In "Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women" Jay devotes a chapter to "Max Malini: The Last of the Mountebanks." Malini, who was born in 1873, stood five feet two, had short arms and unusually small hands, dressed like a dandy, spoke English with a comically heavy Eastern European accent, and was celebrated as the most astonishing sleight-of-hand artist of his day. He performed all over the world, for Presidents, prime ministers, robber barons, emperors, kings, and Al Capone. Jay quotes Nate Leipzig, "a master exponent of pure magic technique" and a contemporary of Malini's: "I would give up everything I know in magic just to get the reaction Malini does from vanishing a single coin." At a dinner party where Dai Vernon was present, Malini borrowed a female guest's hat, spun a half-dollar on the table, and covered it with the hat, which he then lifted to reveal not the coin but a block of ice. Though Vernon knew ahead of time that this effect would be performed, he later reported that Malini, who had remained at the table throughout the meal, "fooled the hell out of me." Jay recounts this and other Malini anecdotes with a mixture of delight and wistfulness. In a just universe, he seems to imply, he himself would have been in Leipzig's and Vernon's shoes, playing to the same discerning audiences that witnessed Malini's exemplary talents. He writes, "Malini was rarely featured on music hall or theatre stages, even though he performed in the heyday of the great illusionists. Yet far more than Malini's contemporaries, the famous conjurers Herrmann, Kellar, Thurston, and Houdini, Malini was the embodiment of what a magician should be—not a performer who requires a fully equipped stage, elaborate apparatus, elephants, or handcuffs to accomplish his mysteries, but one who can stand a few inches from you and with a borrowed coin, a lemon, a knife, a tumbler, or a pack of cards convince you he performs miracles."

Jay feels connected to Malini not only out of veneration but by a strange coincidence. Malini, who was born in a small town on the Polish-Austrian border, had the given name of Max Katz (or, perhaps, Max Katz-Breit). Max Katz was also the name of Jay's maternal grandfather, a well-to-do accountant and, most important, the one member of the family who loved and appreciated Ricky and for whom Ricky in return felt love and gratitude. "My grandfather was an amateur acquirer of skill and knowledge," Jay says. "He was interested in a lot of things—pool, chess, checkers, calligraphy, cryptography, origami, magic. His philosophy was to take lessons from the best available people and then proceed on his own. He was really a terrific teacher. And his greatest contribution was to expose me to the best. Because of him, I was able to see on a regular basis the finest closeup-magic people in the world. Unlike me, he actually liked to fraternize with magicians." At one time, Katz was president of the Society of American Magicians. When, at the age of four, Ricky did his first trick in front of an audience—he multiplied paper coffee creamers during a backyard barbecue for the Society of American Magicians—Dai Vernon was a witness.

Jay told me, "When we watched Vernon, my grandfather would say, 'Look at the Professor and study the naturalness with which he handles objects.' He introduced me to Slydini and to Francis Carlyle, two other great closeup illusionists. These were guys who were capable of doing magic—something beyond tricks—and the fact that they were stylistically so different from each other fascinated me. With Slydini, it was important to understand that he was the master of misdirection—drawing the spectator's attention away from the sleight. With Carlyle, the purpose was to absorb what my grandfather called the clarity of instruction—how Carlyle subtly guided the spectator in a way that enhanced the clarity of the effect. There was a period of several years when I took formal lessons with Slydini. In his stage appearances, which were infrequent, he used to perform in a toreador suit, and he made one

for me. I wore it with my hair slicked back, and I had these fake sideburns pencilled in. I performed with doves. I did a piece called 'The Floating Cane'—stage-illusion work, with no patter, that eventually made me realize I wanted to speak and I preferred closeup. An audition was arranged for me for 'The Ed Sullivan Show.' I wore my toreador suit and wanted to pretend I was Spanish, knowing it would increase my chances of getting on the show, but my parents wouldn't let me. By then, I had already done a lot of television. When I was five, I was supposed to appear on 'Startime Kids,' with Ed Herlihy, but I dozed during the dress rehearsal and slept through the show. I was on a program called 'Time for Pets' when I was seven. I was the youngest magician who had ever been on TV. I was awful. I was a kid. The only thing that's important is that I was very comfortable performing. I was supposed to produce a rabbit, but they couldn't find one, so I had to work with a guinea pig, which took a leak on my father's necktie. My father said, 'Perfect. You get all the glory and I get all the piss.' "

Weekends, Jay often made trips to Manhattan, first in the company of his grandfather and by adolescence often on his own. The cafeteria on the ground floor of the Wurlitzer Building, on West Forty-second Street, was to the magic demimonde what the White Horse Tavern was to literary pretenders. Jay also spent many contented hours at Al Flosso's magic shop, on West Thirty-fourth Street. He preferred Flosso's to the more popular Tannen's, which was then in Times Square, because, above all, he loved Flosso. Also, the marvellous clutter of old posters, handbills, and books appealed to him far more than the antiseptic ambience of Tannen's. "Early on, I knew I didn't want to do the kind of magic other people were doing," he says. "So I started buying old books to look for material." Flosso, in the guise of a sideshow pitchman from Coney Island, did wonderful comedy sleight of hand and had a flourishing career—in the big rooms at Grossinger's and the Concord, on the Sullivan show. When Ricky's parents asked what kind of bar-mitzvah celebration he wanted, he said he

wanted Flosso to perform. “The thing that’s significant about that event is that it’s literally the only warm memory I have of my parents,” he has said.

Prodded by Slydini and his grandfather, he entered several performing competitions at magic conventions. “I always won,” he says. “But the whole thing soured me on the idea of competitions within an art.” By the time he was fifteen, he had had enough of living at home. He moved in with a friend’s family, moved back home again, moved to the resort town of Lake George, in upstate New York (where he discovered what it was like to support himself as a pro), and, before he turned eighteen, had left home for good. He either did or did not officially complete high school—another one of those elusive memories. Max Katz died around that time. At the funeral, Flosso ceremonially broke a wand and placed it in the casket—“the single most frightening thing I ever saw,” Jay says. His grandfather’s death marked the end of his relationship with his parents. (He remains on good terms with his younger sister, whom he says he admires tremendously.) By then, he was living in Illinois, having begun a peripatetic college career. Over a period of ten years, he attended five different colleges and “officially was never anything other than a freshman.” At Cornell, he enrolled in the School of Hotel Management. “In case I had my own joint in Vegas, I thought I might be the only guy in the business who would know how to get around in both the casino and the kitchen,” he likes to say. He and several friends formed an a-cappella doo-wop group called Chico and the Deaf Tones. The Deaf Tones were five guys named Tony plus a girl named Laura. Their big number was “Tell Laura I Love Her.”

To pay tuition and otherwise make ends meet, he briefly sold encyclopedias, travelled with a carnival, worked on Wall Street as an accountant, tended bar, and, of course, did magic. From talking to Jay’s friends, I gathered that there was a time when he played cards for a living. Boldly, I once raised this subject with him, and he pretended not to hear me.

“Would anybody play cards with you today?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said. “Silly people.”

Twice while he was still at Cornell, he appeared on the “Tonight Show.” With Ithaca as his home base, he became nomadic. He performed frequently in Aspen and Lake George, did club and concert dates all over the country with various rock and jazz groups—Ike and Tina Turner, the Chambers Brothers, Leon Redbone, Al Jarreau, Emmylou Harris, Herbie Hancock, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Sometimes he was the opening act, sometimes he was the headliner. Invitations to perform in Europe materialized. In the early seventies, he moved to Los Angeles and found plenty of work, first at a club in Santa Monica called McCabe’s Guitar Shop and then at the Magic Castle. Tracy Newman, a television-comedy writer, who lived with him for a year, says she went to see him perform “probably seventeen times” before they started dating. Not long ago, she told me, “The thing Ricky had that I’d never before seen in a magician was charm. At McCabe’s, he was doing improvisational patter. He had his stuff down so well he was just free. He had the guts to bring people onstage and really play with them, instead of having to be so careful that they might see something that would cause him to blow what he was trying to do. He was very casual, but his language had a Shakespearean feel. He was brutal with hecklers—not because it would throw him off. He just didn’t like hecklers. He vaporized them.”

In those days, Dai Vernon had a sinecure at the Magic Castle that entitled him to living quarters nearby. Vernon’s presence was the main thing that had attracted Jay to Los Angeles. When he was not on the road, he sought out the Professor’s company virtually every night. Wherever they started the evening—at the Castle or somewhere else—they would invariably wind up at Canter’s Deli, on Fairfax Avenue, a shrine of vinyl and Formica and leaden matzo balls. There Vernon would hold forth until five or six in the morning. A few years ago, Jay wrote a magazine article in which he described one such session at Canter’s, an occasion when he

petitioned for practical counsel rather than the generous praise that Vernon typically dispensed:

"Professor," I protested, "I really want to know how I can improve my technique and performance. I want to take lessons from you. I really want advice."

Vernon smiled his patented half smile, and with a delicate movement of his eyes beckoned me closer. I leaned forward with anticipation, almost unable to contain my excitement, about to receive my benediction from the master. "You want advice, Ricky," he said. "I'll give you advice. Fuck as many different women as you can. Not the same one. Not the same one. Fuck many different women. Many different women."

Persi Diaconis ran away from his unhappy home at the age of fourteen and spent two years travelling with Vernon—an unsentimental education. "Life with Vernon was a challenge," Diaconis says. "Vernon would use secrecy as a way of torturing you. When he and I were on the road, he woke up one morning and said, 'You know, I've been thinking about sleight of hand my whole life, and I think I now know how to encapsulate it in one sentence.' And then, of course, he refused to tell me." Another friend of Vernon's once said, "I wouldn't have taken a million dollars not to have known him. But I'd give a million not to know another one like him."

Vernon was extroverted, insouciant, a winning combination of gentleman and rake. Though he perfectly fitted the role of guru, he was not the paternal mentor that Jay's grandfather had been. To the extent that anyone could fill that void, Charlie Miller did. "Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women," which Jay spent ten years writing, is dedicated "to my wonderful friend Charles Earle Miller, a unique, eccentric, and remarkable entertainer." Had Miller not been Vernon's contemporary, Jay believes, he would have been regarded as the greatest sleight-of-hand figure of his time. "For fifty or sixty years, Charlie lived in Vernon's shadow," he says. "And yet Vernon knew that Charlie was the best sleight-of-hand artist he'd ever seen." Vernon once described Miller as

"unquestionably the most skilful exponent of the magic art it has ever been my pleasure to know." Miller was a shy, vulnerable man, for whom public performance was a bravura act.

As a friend to Jay, Diaconis, Steve Freeman, and another accomplished magician, John Thompson—his four most reverent acolytes—he was emotionally much warmer than Vernon. "Vernon was very comfortable to be around," Freeman says. "But Charlie was your pal, Charlie was your uncle, Charlie cared about you." On the West Coast, he was the premier cruise-ship performer, and this arrangement suited his essentially rootless nature. (Jay himself worked very few cruise ships—a merciful policy, he says, because "the people who went on cruises had saved up their entire lives just to get on a boat and be away from people who looked like me.") For Vernon, Jay says, "making money was only a means of allowing him to sit in a hotel room and think about his art, about cups and balls and coins and cards." Charlie Miller was, if anything, more cerebral, even more obsessive.



Signed photo of Ricky Jay mentors Charlie Miller (left) and Dai Vernon (right).

"Charlie and Vernon we're both magicians for magicians," says Robert Lund, the founder of the American Museum of Magic, in Marshall, Michigan. "Only magicians truly appreciated what Charlie was doing. Charlie knew more about why you do it this way instead of that way than anyone I've ever met in my life, including Ricky Jay. If there were a hundred

ways of doing an effect—a card trick or sawing a lady in half—Charlie went through all hundred and analysed each one, looking for the most natural way of doing it, the approach that would be the most palatable and acceptable to an audience.”

More than any other magician Jay has known, Miller had an orthodox devotion to preserving the secrets of the art—a fundamental precept that Jay today shares with Diaconis and Freeman. To their dismay, Vernon wrote a series of instruction books. When these began to appear in print, Diaconis said to Vernon, “Why did you publish these, Professor? We don’t want the animals using tools.” As a palliative, they can speculate about the secrets that Miller took to the grave—an absolutism that, while perhaps depriving him of mundane celebrity, at least made the secrets themselves immortal. “Charlie would never tell anything to anybody who wasn’t really on the inside,” Diaconis says. “There’s something called the Sprong shift. Sprong was a night watchman—he did that for a living so that he could spend his days practicing card handling.

The Sprong shift is a certain way of reversing the cards so that a card that would be in the middle will end up on top. It’s a move that has been passed down only orally. It’s never been described or even hinted at in writing that such a thing existed. It got disseminated to three or five of us, and the one who does it beautifully is Ricky. Charlie had the capacity to watch Ricky practice it for several hours non-stop. He’d keep moving around the room to see it from every possible angle.”

After both Vernon and Miller died, there were memorial services at the Magic Castle—events that Jay refused to attend, because, he said to Freeman, “most of those people didn’t know anything about Vernon and Charlie.”

“I now say that keeping secrets is my single most important contribution to magic,” Diaconis says. “Listen, I have lots of things I won’t tell Ricky about. It’s pretty hard for us to fool each other. Several years ago, he

borrowed my deck and had me pick a card. Then he told me to reach into my left trousers pocket and there was the card I’d picked. For half an hour, I was as badly fooled as I’ve ever been. In order for him to bring that about, he had to take dead aim at me. That’s a phrase we use in discussing the big con: taking dead aim—deeply researching somebody’s habits.”

Jay once subjected Freeman to an equally unsettling experience. “I walked into Ricky’s apartment one day, and I was wearing a shirt that Charlie Miller had given to Ricky and that Ricky had left at my house,” Freeman says. “I was returning it, but, just for fun, I had put it on. I took the shirt off, and Ricky said, ‘Oh, just leave it on the back of that chair.’

Then we started talking for a while and he said he wanted to show me a new trick. He spread the deck face up and told me to point to a card. I did, and then I gathered and shuffled and dealt them face up. There were only fifty-one. I didn’t see my card. And he said, ‘Oh, well, go over and look in the pocket of that shirt over there.’ And the card was in the shirt pocket.

It takes a lot of knowledge about people to be able to do something like that. Ricky was enormously satisfied. Did I figure it out? Well, I was very fooled at the time. I felt stupid, but it was nice to be fooled. That’s not a feeling we get to have very often anymore.”

BY MARK SINGER

APRIL 5, 1993

(To be continued)

This article appears for the first time in the New Yorker.



AGENDA

October 23 [Amsterdam Bar Magic Show](#)
Cafe De Buurvrouw Amsterdam

October 25, Improv for Magicians |
QFactory

October 27 - [Amsterdam Magic Society](#)
[Discord](#)

October 31 [The Rose Seance](#)
[Experiment](#) | Boom Chicago Amsterdam

November 3 - [The London Magic](#)
[Convention](#) | London, England.

November 5 - [Amsterdam Magic Show](#) |
Boom Chicago Amsterdam

November 7-9 - [New England Magic](#)
[Collectors Association](#) (NEMCA) - the
Yankee Gathering in Nashua | New
Hampshire USA

November 8-10 - [Daytona Beach](#)
[Festival of Magic](#) | Daytona, Florida

November 8-10 - [2nd Magia IBM](#)
[Barcelona Ring 401](#) | Barcelona, Spain

November 11 | [AMSociety Meeting](#),
Mascini Amsterdam

November 12-13 - [The Science of Magic](#)
| Las Vegas, Nevada

November 14 - 17 | [Belgium goes](#)
[Mental](#), Brussels

November 17-19 - [MINDvention](#) |
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

November 20 | [Lecture Giancarlo Scalia](#),
Cafe De Buurvrouw Amsterdam

November 31 [The Rose Seance](#)
[Experiment](#) | Boom Chicago Amsterdam

December 12 [The Great Magician](#)
[Curating Mysteries](#) - Rico Weeland |





THE
ROSE SÉANCE
EXPERIMENT

OCTOBER 31



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