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MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR

Three magicians emerge from behind the mysterious curtain that veils the world of illusion to enlighten us on the art of the impossible



"It's a rush. A natural high. It's inherently fascinating to see something that your experience of the world tells you is impossible. Because if this impossible thing is happening, who knows what other impossibilities might also be achievable?" So says Australian illusionist Simon Coronel as he explains why we like to be fooled. "It's very subconscious, but I think there's a subtle, inherent sense of excitement and possibility when seeing a powerful illusion."

Coronel is a sleight-of-hand illusionist who has reached the highest levels of his art, a prize winner at the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés Magiques (International Federation of Magic Societies, (FISM) in 2009, the most coveted of magic accolades. "And if nothing else," he says, "things outside our experience or understanding are just fascinating. Illusions simulate this, and hence trigger a lot of curiosity and enjoyment processes in our minds."

Coronel points out that within the world of magic there is an ongoing discussion about the use of the word 'fooled', and it seems that in recent years people have begun to veer away from the term, branding it with negative connotations: being fooled, tricked, deceived, made to look or feel stupid are deemed contradictory to the experience an entertainer or artist wants their audience to experience. Coronel says, "Ever since magician Paul Harris published a series of books called *The Art of Astonishment* over a decade ago, the term 'astonishment' has gained popularity as the goal of a magical performance. It's seen as a positive emotional experience; being amazed in a wondrous rather than a challenging way." ▶



PAUL KIEVE believes collaboration with other magicians is key to modern magic

FROM TOP ILLUSTRATION FLORIAN WAGNER PHOTOS FOTOLIA, BARRY MARS DEN

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Farquhar knows audiences; he's worked closely with them for decades. He muses on why illusion appeals and suggests that it is firstly related to feeling "like a child again". In this way, the audience experiences an element of freedom and is transported into a "world of fantasy for a few minutes". And secondly, posits Farquhar, people simply enjoy a puzzle.

magicians of the last few decades. Amongst a host of other star names, Gaughan has worked with David Blaine, David Copperfield, Siegfried and Roy and Ricky Jay. Although he is not a household name in the same sense that his performing collaborators are, he stands quite alone in the world of magic.

"Illusions don't work anywhere," says Gaughan "they have to be built for the audience and that's where we start from. The magician wants something as versatile as possible so it can work in the middle of a football field or a living room, theatre and street performance. But you just can't do that most of the time. I have to be keenly aware of the audience; where they are, how far away they are, the lighting on the magician, all of that is very critical."

Highly creative British illusionist Paul Kieve devises magical illusions for theatre and film, as well as bespoke illusions for private clients. Collaborating with the likes of Sam Mendes, the Royal Shakespeare Company, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cirque de Soleil's director, Franco Dragone, he has also created magical illusions for Harry Potter in the film *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. His view is that magic, to a high degree, "is a very isolated art form and because of that it's been quite held back". It has been argued that magic has failed to integrate – or at least failed to be integrated into – mainstream theatrical productions and is considered to be an art apart by set designers, lighting designers, costume designers and writers and directors.

And it is not, Farquhar reasons, particularly difficult. He explains that he could hand over a piece of apparatus, explain how it works and within a few weeks of hard practice, most people could present a show. "But," he adds, "when an illusion is really good, it transcends the prop. In a good piece of theatre, the theatre and the act all seem to blend together. A good illusionist takes a prop, bends it to his or her character and makes something that is theatrically pleasing, entertaining, mystifying. That's a successful illusion."

Designing the props is an art in itself. Where John Gaughan is concerned, however, the term prop is something of an understatement. Well-known also as a historian of magic, from his discreetly located workshop in Los Angeles Gaughan has designed illusions and props for some of the most celebrated



THE PRESENTATION of magic is as vital as the illusion itself, believes Shawn Farquhar

"What does being a magician mean anyway?" asks Paul Kieve. "When you say you're a singer, you are; when you say you're a juggler, you are; when you say you're a comedian, you are. But when you're a magician, you're not. There's an old saying by Robert-Houdin [considered to be



SHAWN FARQUHAR is a fan of audience participation

PORTRAIT PHOTOS COURTESY SHAWN FARQUHAR

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the 'father' of modern magic and in whose honour the much more famous Houdini, aka illusionist Eric Weiss, took his name] that a great magician is an actor playing the part of a magician. You need theatrical skills to do magic but it's not the same as theatrical storytelling."

This position somewhere between theatrical performer and pure magician, however, can be liberating. "I find it quite a thrilling process," says Kieve, "I get to do things I would never have done or thought to do, such as devising from a script, which comes from the mind of a writer. I moved away a long time ago from this rather rigid idea that magic has to happen with a magician performing it, instead of collaborating with a lot of other artists and performers."



Collaboration with the audience is often a centre point of a magician's performance, and for some this element is of paramount importance. This has led Shawn Farquhar to explain at the beginning of his shows that he is not merely performing to the audience, but sees performance and audience participation as two sides of the same coin. Farquhar describes this as "working cooperatively to have a great time. No two of my shows are the same, but I know where they're going. I like to think of myself as the ringmaster of a very interesting circus, and I'm not the only performer."

As star magicians find ever more inventive ways of performing to as wide an audience as possible, perhaps most notably with US magician David Blaine, the best magicians are very much in demand. Farquhar, for example, receives frequent requests to create illusions for a specific client and for private events. "I find it to be some of my most challenging work. When someone asks me to customise something, they generally already have a picture of what they want in their minds. I have to be able to draw that out of someone; not everyone is articulate enough to be able to explain what they really want. Usually it's something far beyond what could be created, but I work with that to find a solution. Once in a while it's easier than I expect."

Organisations such as the International Brotherhood of Magic, the Magic Castle in Hollywood, the Magic Circle in the UK, and the Australian Society of Magicians showcase illusionists and can also help magic fans who are looking to commission an illusionist. Some magic enthusiasts choose their favourite illusionist, others look to competitors at the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés Magiques triannual competition, the most prestigious of magic competitions, to find an illusionist for their special event or to commission.

In Great Britain, for example, "The Magic Circle is a good first port of call for anyone looking to commission an illusionist of their own," says Nick FitzHerbert, member of the Magic Circle. "Within its walls and membership you will find more knowledge, props and expertise than anywhere else [in the country]. It enables you to go direct to people who actually create and perform illusions."



With star magicians in high demand, John Gaughan reflects on what makes an illusion successful. "They are a kind of variation on a theme ... We try to take the audience along a path and then misdirect them. Some people will be coming back, so we still want to deceive the audience no matter how many times they see a performance." Surely with technology there are more possibilities to achieve this? John is unequivocal. "Technology is a dressing on top of a tried and true illusion. The human mind is still very primitive; it's easy to mislead people. Modern hydraulics and so on can help but you're still relying on the basic principles. The fundamentals haven't changed."

Helen Wybrew-Bond



SIMON CORONEL, Australian slight-of-hand illusionist

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