# PERFORMING DECEPTION

## LEARNING, SKILL AND THE ART OF CONJURING

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# 1. A Kind of Magic

How can we understand ourselves, others and the world around us? What forms of labor are entailed in doing so? How can we recognize and foster skillful ways of seeing, feeling and acting? *Performing Deception* attends to these questions by recounting the efforts associated with learning one type of performance art: entertainment magic.

In the pages that follow, I suggest possibilities that entertainment magic (a.k.a. 'modern conjuring' or 'secular magic')[1] offers us for engaging with one another. While not unique to this art form, those possibilities are primarily associated with (i) a playful orientation toward deception, and (ii) a recognition of the limits of perception.

On the first, deception is rarely held up by conjurors as their ultimate aim; however, they routinely engage in forms of action and inaction intended to mislead their audiences. At least for some, deceiving is more fundamental to this art than entertaining; while a magician might wish to amuse their audiences, they must deceive them.[2] More than this, though, conjuring as a staged activity entails mutually monitored deception between those involved. While magicians might proffer all sorts of verbal and non-verbal explanations for their feats, audiences are likely to be suspicious about how both can function as techniques of subterfuge. Magicians, in turn, craft their performances in anticipation that at least some eyes and ears are primed for tell-tale signs of chicanery. How these overall expectations meet each other—and, in doing so, make magic—is a recurring topic for this book. In contrast to many characterizations of conjuring as a one-directional exercise in control by

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1   During, Simon. 2002. *Modern Enchantments*. London: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674034396.

2   Comments made during Earl, Ben. 2020, July 11. *Deep Magic Seminar*. For a contrasting orientation to the rightful place of deception, see Corrigan, B. J. 2018. '"This Rough Magic I Here Abjure": Performativity, Practice and Purpose of the Bizarre', *Journal of Performance Magic*, 5(1). https://doi.org/10.5920/jpm.2018.05

magicians, however, I advance an understanding of it as a reciprocal interaction that involves the interplay of care, control and cooperation.

On the second offering of entertainment magic, learning conjuring is an unmistakably embodied endeavor. The body is a starting basis for engagements with the world, and a product of those engagements. And yet, more subtle considerations will come into play in *Performing Deception*, other than noting how an individual's trained body figures as both means and ends. I will advance conjuring as a curious art because of how the acquisition of skills invites a refinement *and* an unsettling of sensory experiences.[3] Learning magic supports recognition by the learner of how what is observable depends on our human faculties, and underscoring (again and again) that these faculties are fallible.[4] In this way, learning magic illustrates the illusionary nature of our everyday sensory ways of navigating through the world, even as our perceptions are vital to experiencing magic in the first place. I want to consider the kinds of possibilities and challenges this condition provides for rethinking our interactions with one another—if we can find ways to be receptive to the tangles of experience. Part of the intended offering of *Performing Deception* is to propose approaches, techniques and concepts for getting entangled.

## Beginnings

This book adopts a particular tack in doing so. Its central spine consists of what is conventionally called a 'self-study' (or what I will come to refer to as a 'self-other' study).[5] I detail my immersion into learning conjuring as a basis for considering how practical reasoning and embodied skills are acquired.

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3    For a cultural critique of how the body has been approached as unreliable, see Bordo, Susan. 1993. *Unbearable Weight*. London: University of California Press: Chapter 1.

4    For an example on such an undertaking, see Ekroll, Vebjørn, Sayim, Bilge and Wagemans, Johan. 2017. 'The Other Side of Magic: The Psychology of Perceiving Hidden Things', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(1): 91–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616654676.

5    This is in line with traditions across a variety of disciplines. For instance: Sudnow, D. 1978. *Ways of the Hand*. London: MIT Press; O'Connor, E. 2005. 'Embodied Knowledge', *Ethnography*, 6: 183–204; and Rouncefield, M. and Tolmie, P. (Eds) 2013. *Ethnomethodology at Work*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315580586.

To offer an analogy, this study is not conceived as providing a panoramic view looking down on a terrain from the highest vantage point. Instead, it is an analysis of what climbing entails; it is from a starting position of comparative *ignorance* and *inability* that I want to voice appreciations of conjuring.

What can be gained by attending to the toils of a learner? The intention here is not to forward my experiences as somehow standing for every magician or beginner. Instead, my questions and quandaries serve as entry points for thinking through what is at stake in the development of competency.

For instance, looming large for me when this work began in late 2017 was an elementary matter: I had not the faintest clue what skills would be involved. At the time, my conjuring know-how was confined to a hazy memory of a couple of childhood card tricks. This ignorance was not by chance. As an activity of staging the fantastic, improbable or impossible, magic relies on covertness in method. Moreover—as mentioned in the preface—in my case the unfamiliarity was self-enforced. Since my original inspiration to undertake this research in 2002, up until late 2017 I had steadfastly avoided watching documentary-type programs on magic or even attending live performances.

Basic uncertainty about 'how magic is done' fostered a lingering doubt about my prospects for acquiring any level of proficiency. As with other arts and crafts—dancing, glass blowing or sculpting, to name but a few—through subjecting oneself to the repetitive demands of training, it is possible to cultivate new ways of acting in the world. The prospects for refining through practice, though, is mingled with basic questions about the requisite underlying abilities necessary. When I told a friend about my impending conjuring venture, she replied: 'Oh I would love to learn magic, but doesn't it take a lot of dexterity?'. I guessed that it did. As a then 45-year-old with no particular background of fine motor training, I worried about the physical demands. What was required, whether I wanted to discipline myself enough to undertake the training, as well as whether I had a sufficient level of agility to train at all, though, were matters I could only speculate about before I began.[6]

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6    It would be many months until I appreciated that many professional magicians lament how much their colleagues rely on manufactured gimmicks which replace the need to learn physical sleights. As in comments by John Carney, see Regal, D. 2019. *Interpreting Magic*. Blue Bike Productions: 142.

It was against these kinds of uncertainties that I formulated a starting sense of how my status as a beginner would prove advantageous. As Zen monk Shunryu Suzuki advocated, the promise of a 'beginner's mind' is to be able to question what might otherwise be taken for granted or discounted.[7] As he contended, 'In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few'.[8] In approaching magic without many preconceptions, I hoped to attend to aspects of this art that might be known but go unnoticed by more seasoned hands.

As this book will make clear (especially Chapter 5), experienced magicians often seek to cultivate a mind without preconceptions. This is so because they wish to understand the effects of their doings on their audiences. Being able to see with the eyes of the uninitiated, however, is by no means regarded as straightforward. A common criticism some magicians make is that their peers are too fixated on their own predilections to recognize what matters for audiences. As a result, being taken as able to speak for audiences is a prized aptitude. In no small manner, the attribution of this ability defines who speaks with authority.

These points imply that an account of magic—especially how it is learnt—should not be divorced from who is giving that account. Partial in its view, locatable within a biography and corporeally embodied, *Performing Deception* offers what Donna Haraway called situated knowledge.[9] It is an account from a shifting 'here' rather than from an abstract 'nowhere' or universal 'everywhere'.

I will characterize my learning development as aligned with the circulation between the modes educational theorist David Kolb proposed as part of 'experiential learning'.[10] Herein, learning consists of (i) taking in information through attending to lived *concrete experiences* and by using *abstract concepts and theories*, as well as (ii) transforming information through acts of *observation and reflection* and by *active experimentation* in solving problems. I take Kolb's four-part breakdown of learning not as neatly distinct categories, but instead as starting

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7    Suzuki, Shunryu. 2005. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. London: Shambhala.
8    Ibid.: 2.
9    Haraway, Donna. 1988. 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* (Autumn), *14*(3): 575–599.
10   Kolb, D. A. 2015. *Experiential Learning* (Second Edition). Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education. See, as well, Ragin, Charles and Amoroso, Lisa M. 1994. *Constructing Social Research: The Unity and Diversity of Method*. London: Sage.

prompts for considering inter-relations between different ways of being in the world. I portray the processes of taking in information as well as transforming it as infused with disorientations. In my case, learning magic entailed a maturing hesitancy about what I knew, even as I became defter in physically moving objects and socially being with audiences.

To present learning as an interchange between experiences, concepts, reflections and experimentation implies that each mode needs to be understood in relation to other modes and, furthermore, that none should occupy a privileged place. Within many academic studies— including those of embodied skills training—it is commonplace to start with concepts and theories that serve as grid templates for determining what and how to analyze. In the case of studying enskillment, theories of labor and alienation, theories of gender enaction, or theories of embodiment all could serve as headline orientations. A theory-led analysis would aim to establish how the topic at hand illustrates, disproves, confounds, elaborates (and so on) this or that set of abstract concepts. Such a course is not taken in this book. Theories and concepts are not treated as externally derived reference frames that serve as the beginning and end points of study. Instead, I position them as relevant in the manner that *abstract concepts and theories* arise from and inform the medley of learning. Learning ways of reasoning and types of skill associated with performing magic meant encountering a whole array of binds, queries and uncertainties I had never anticipated at the start. Examining those knotty experiences through whatever resources seem fruitful has been my overall orientation.

To write this, though, is not to claim the topics at hand are somehow understood wholly on their terms, without recourse to starting presumptions or enduring preoccupations. At times in *Performing Deception*, its starting points will be evident. For instance, motivated early on by a desire to ask how magic provides a means for coming to understand ourselves, others and the world, in this book I frequently return to questioning the relevance of deception in its undertaking.[11] I ask how the acknowledgement that some kind of intended manipulation

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11  For efforts to distinguish entertainment magic through reference to deception, see Luhrmann, Tanya M. 1989. 'The Magic of Secrecy', *Ethos*, *17*(2): 131–165 and Villalobos, J. Guillermo, Ogundimu, Ololade O. and Davis, Deborah. 2014. 'Magic Tricks'. In: *Encyclopedia of Deception*, Timothy R. Levine (Ed.), Thousand Oaks: Sage: 636–640.

is afoot informs the actions and experiences of magicians and audiences alike. Concepts of deception, however, are positioned as relevant in relation to an overall path of learning. They inform observations, reflections and experimentation, and each of these, in turn, inform the further selection and interpretation of concepts and theories. This iterative path is how I hope to see the world through concepts but not to be (overly) blinded by them.

As elaborated in later chapters, dynamic relations between the modes of experiential learning were particularly salient for my development because my initial performance audience consisted of fellow academics. These individuals often brought to bear their own formal theories for interpreting what they had witnessed.[12] In practice, their reliance on theories aided me to selectively direct their attention through acts of simulation and dissimulation.[13]

While attending to mine and others' mix of experiences, concepts, reflections and experimentation moderates the role given to abstractions, this tack simultaneously suggests giving the nitty-gritty minutiae of our practical doings a more prominent space than they are often accorded. Such attention, in turn, is aligned with certain intellectual approaches. Harold Garfinkel characterized a central task of ethnomethodology as treating 'practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological reasoning as topics of empirical study, and by paying to the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded to extraordinary events, seek to learn about them as phenomena in their own right'.[14] So, too, is this a central task in *Performing Deception*.

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12   For a discussion of the relevance of existing beliefs in the interpretation of magic, see Smith, W. et al. (forthcoming). *Explaining the Unexplainable: People's Response to Magical Technologies*; and Olson, J. A., Landry, M., Appourchaux, K. and Raz, A., 2016. 'Simulated Thought Insertion', *Consciousness and Cognition*, 43: 11–26. https://doi.org/0.1016/j.concog.2016.04.010.

13   Much the same can and has been said for magicians too. For an extended argument on how magicians' assumptions and concepts can lead them astray, see Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.

14   Garfinkel, Harold. 1984. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity: 1. In a related but also distinctive vein, this book—at times—adopts what Tia DeNora referred to as a 'slow sociology'. See DeNora, Tia. 2014. *Making Sense of Reality*. London: Sage. https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446288320. For a discussion of magic as a practical accomplishment, see Laurier, Eric. 2004. 'The Spectacular Showing: Houdini and the Wonder of Ethnomethodology', *Human Studies, 27*: 377–399. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-004-3341-5.

In attending to the particulars of doing, what will become plain is that learning is characterized by unruliness. As with other crafts and arts entailing bodily movement, positioning, grasping and the like, learning conjuring involves developing a direct hands-on sense of how to act. This includes how to engage with objects and material environments. However, in practice, these can rebuff our whims. In magic, everyday objects or specially ordered props can fail to bend, snap, twist, flip or slide appropriately. Material settings like a stage or a table can prove stubbornly resistant to requirements. As Andy Pickering, Annemarie Mol and others have advocated, understanding how humans act in the world requires attending to the back-and-forth dance between human and non-human agency. Each affects the other.[15] What the general acknowledgement of this dance implies is that skills development is bound to be unpredictable. And so it was for me.

## Defining Magic

To preview the subsequent argument, as I have done so far in this introduction, might well be regarded as premature. After all, so far no definition has been given to the central topic under investigation. What, then, is entertainment magic?

Magic. The term routinely conjures up all sorts of associations. At times, that might be recollections of iconic acts, such as a rabbit being pulled out of a top hat. At other times, specific performers might come to mind. David Copperfield, Penn & Teller and David Blaine featured as some of the eminent individuals that formed my early impressions of this art. Magic can also be defined in terms of what it does: generating wonder, a natural state of mind, astonishment and sometimes even discomfort have been advanced as its central aims.[16] Such effects stem

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15 Pickering, Andrew. 2017. 'In Our Place: Performance, Dualism, and Islands of Stability', *Common Knowledge, 23*(3): 381–395. https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-3987761 and Mol, Annemarie. 2002. *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384151.

16 For varied statements on what effects are sought, see Sharpe, S. H. 2003. *Art and Magic*. Seattle: The Miracle Factory; Brown, Derren. 2003. *Absolute Magic: A Model for Powerful Close-Up Performance* (Second edition). London: H&R Magic Books. Harris, Paul and Mead, Eric. *The Art of Astonishing*. [n.p.]: Multimedia A-1; Fitzkee, Dariel. *Magic by Misdirection;* Burger, E., and Neale, R. E. 2009. *Magic and Meaning*. Seattle: Hermetic Press.

from the 'juxtaposition between the conviction that something cannot happen and the observation that it just happened.'[17] Instead of merely challenging audiences to discover how effects are produced, some professionals take their job to be one of creating illusions that truly convince audiences that the impossible has been made possible[18]...at least for a short time.[19] For some, 'magic' as a designation should be reserved only for displays of the impossible in which the magician has calculatingly cancelled out every reasonable explanation audiences might harbor.[20]

Alternatively, entertainment magic can be recognized through its kindred affiliations. Even in modern times, that company has varied widely. Reading the mind of a member of the audience has been aligned with paranormal abilities, mystical energies and much more besides. Just as magic can be defined through its affiliations, it can be defined through its *disaffiliations*. Reading the mind of a member of the audience can be overtly presented as decidedly *not* based on paranormal abilities, mystical energies and much more besides.

The diverse pictures and feelings magic summons point to the scope for disagreement about just what ought to be conjured up through evoking this term.[21]

Consequently, in examining entertainment magic, a trick I will need to execute throughout this book is how to both trade on settled notions of what magic entails (to build on others' prior observations), while also calling into doubt settled notions (to question certain presumptions). The need to do so for this specific term is just one instance of many in which I will both marshal and question prevalent concepts, conventions and categories.

In acknowledging this tension, I want to offer the characterization of entertainment magic as *deft contrariwise performance*. The purpose

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17  Lamont, Peter. 2009. 'Magic and the Willing Suspension of Disbelief'. In *Magic Show*, Jonathan Allen and Sally O'Reilly (Eds). London: Hayward Publishing: 30.

18  For instance: see Aronson, Simon. 1990. *The Illusion of Impossibility*. [n.p.]: Simon Aronson: 172; Tamariz, Juan. 2019. *The Magic Rainbow*. Rancho Cordova, CA: Penguin Magic; and Olewitz, Chloe. 2020. 'Francis Menotti's Weird Words', *Genii* (November): 39.

19  Nelms, Henning. [1969] 2000. *Magic and Showmanship*. Mineola, NY: Dover.

20  Leddington, Jason. 2016. 'The Experience of Magic', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 74(3): 253–264.

21  Allen, Jonathan. 2007. 'Deceptionists at War', *Cabinet* (Summer), *26*. http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/26/allen.php

of doing so is not to assert a universal definition that sorts out once and for all what really counts as conjuring 'proper'. Instead of sticking labels, my purpose is to advance a set of sensitivities for considering the possibilities magic provides for understanding ourselves, others and the world.

Let me expand. *Deft* speaks to how proficiency in conjuring requires adroitness and artfulness. The want for such skillfulness, though, is being conceived in a particular way that might counter some readers' expectations. Deft could be taken to apply to the appearances of handling techniques. In this vein, a deft performer is someone who smoothly, confidently and neatly manipulates the apparatus of magic—cards, coins, balls and the like.[22] Or, deft might refer to someone with a silver tongue who confidently commands a floor. While magicians often seek to act in ways regarded as nimble, flashy or adroit, often times they do not. Appearing chaotic, clumsy or even out of control in the eyes of audiences is one way of hiding jiggery-pokery.[23] Struggling can help excite drama too.[24] Thus, magicians can be regarded as virtuoso performers without displaying virtuosity in their movements.[25] Deft, then, does not signal a finished quality of appearance, but rather an orientation to appearances. Appreciating when and how to display manual or other abilities is part of the competency developed in learning magic.

As implied by the previous paragraph, conjuring needs to be understood through reference to both the actions and experiences of all those taking part in it. In this vein, to characterize magic as a type of *performance* is to signal how it entails individuals engaging with each other (physically or remotely) through practices, conventions and rituals. The *performance* in *deft contrariwise performance* is understood in an expansive manner. Following sociologist Erving Goffman, performance is conceived here as 'all the activity of a given participant

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22  For a statement along these lines see Garcia, Frank. 1972. *Million Dollar Cardsecrets*. New York: Million Dollar Productions.

23  For practitioner discussion of this, see Youell, Steven. 2009. *Weapons of Mass Deception*. Lecture notes: 45–47. For an analysis on how being out of control is marshalled in performance, see Jones, Graham and Shweder, Lauren. 2003. 'The Performance of Illusion and Illusionary Performatives: Learning the Language of Theatrical Magic', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology, 13*(1):51–70.

24  Clifford, Peter. 2020. *A Story for Performance*. Lecture notes from presentation at The Session (London), 12 January.

25  As a result of the previous points, what counts as a virtuosic performance is as up for dispute as what makes magic 'magical'.

on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants'.[26]

Three points of clarification to this definition of *performance* need to be made at this stage. First, magic in this book is not simply conceived in relation to the activities of one figure—the magician. While a conjuror might be the center of attention and might be called 'the performer', audience members are approached as meaningful agents. A goal of this argument is to describe how. Second, magic is approached as a coupling of people and material things. As such, the material world can be conceived of as a meaningful agent in what unfolds. Again, a goal of this argument is to describe how. Third, entertainment magic has a complex relation to the recognition that a performance is taking place. At one extreme, overtly billed instances of conjuring, like a Las Vegas stage show, might be widely appreciated as contrived performances. Yet it is just this recognition that hazards those present dismissing or downplaying what they witness as 'mere' trickery. At the other extreme, efforts to weave displays of the impossible into everyday settings without the conventional trappings of 'a magic show' risk being dismissed or downplayed as mere coincidence, mistaken perception and so on. As a result, how a scene is defined by those involved is of no small significance to how and whether the label of 'magic' applies.

Whilst not an everyday or scholarly word, the various definitions of *contrariwise* speak to important considerations in conjuring. One definition of contrariwise is 'contrary to expectations'.[27] Magic often entails spectators observing outcomes the audience believes could not have taken place.[28] How can coins be plucked out of mid-air—one after another, and another and another? Just what is considered contrary to expectations, though, is not fixed. Conjuring exists in a dynamic relation to cultural beliefs because it seeks to defy some of them and, in doing so, helps redefine what counts as a valid belief. Everyday notions of what is possible have shifted over time, not least because of technology. As a result, conjurors have adapted their routines to cultural expectations in

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26    Goffman, Erving. 1956. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday: 8.

27    *Memidex*. http://www.memidex.com/contrariwise+to-the-contrary

28    Lamont, Peter. 2013. *Extraordinary Beliefs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139094320.

order to keep their methods obscured.[29] But more than this, conjurors have marshalled the commonplace beliefs of their day about science, technology and magic itself to misdirect. The last of these is perhaps particularly noteworthy. The magician turned espionage consultant John Mulholland spoke to this point in his secret manual for the US Central Intelligence Agency. For him, defying others' presumptions about how deception is achieved was integral to successful trickery.[30] Entertainment magic is accomplished—and covert espionage operations as well—when the performing actors play off the beliefs of their audiences (whether erroneous or valid).

Another definition of *contrariwise* is 'from a contrasting point of view'.[31] Magicians often seek to foster an impression in audiences at odds with their own understanding. Shuffling cards might be taken by onlookers as a process of disordering. Yet, for those doing the manipulations, shuffling can be a process of ordering. As such, practicing magic routinely requires trying to imagine others' perception of what is on display rather than relying on what one knows to be the case. Darwin Ortiz spoke to this point in contending that the impressiveness of an effect *'depends on your audience's perceptions, not on the reality of the situation'*.[32] When magicians perform for audiences with varying familiarization with magic, approaching the performance from contrasting points of view is vital. This is so because what generates awe in those with no knowledge of the methods of magic may not do so for old hands. When magicians perform across cultures, the demands on their art can be considerable.[33]

*Contrariwise* also means 'in a perverse manner'.[34] Certainly, magic can be performed in troublesome ways. For instance, this happens when

29  Bell, Karl. 2012. *The Magical Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Mangan, Michael. 2007. *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring*. Bristol: Intellect; and Smith, Wally. 2015. 'Technologies of Stage Magic: Simulation and Dissimulation', *Social Studies of Science*, *45*(3):319–343. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312715577461

30  Mulholland, John. 2010. In *The Official CIA Manual of Trickery and Deception*, H. Keith Melton and Robert Wallace (Eds). London: Hardie Grant: 69–81.

31  *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language* (Fifth Edition). 2011. https://www.thefreedictionary.com/contrariwise

32  Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 70 (italics in original).

33  Palshikar, Shreeyash. 2007. 'Protean Fakir', *Cabinet* (Summer). http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/26/

34  *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language* (Fifth Edition). 2011. https://www.thefreedictionary.com/contrariwise

magicians take themselves too seriously, or when they fail to take the magic seriously.[35] On the former, with asymmetries between performers and audiences regarding who speaks and who directs, the potential entertainment value of magic exists alongside its potential for inflicting humiliation and domination.[36] In short, it is a double-edged activity. The double edge, in part, derives from how establishing a human(e) connection with others is both frustrated and underpinned by secrecy and deception. The potential inflicting domination also stems from how magic enacts wider cultural beliefs. As such, what counts as entertaining can reinforce questionable stereotypes of the time on matters of gender, class, race and much else.[37]

At perhaps its most general definition, *contrariwise* can simply mean 'in the opposite way'.[38] In my experience, learning magic requires cultivating opposing manners of reasoning. An example of this is the ability to shift between different orientations to sensory experience. On the one hand, as with so many other arts, learning consists of developing something of an 'eye'.[39] A learner begins to appreciate and harness visual and other sensory subtleties that would pass by the uninitiated. Concerning his apprenticeship as an amateur boxer, for instance, sociologist Loïc Wacquant described how he acquired the 'eye of a boxer' that enabled him to pick up on otherwise invisible movements.[40] I, too, developed newfound appreciations.

Conversely, because of how magic often utilizes the bounds of our cognitive and perceptual capabilities, learning entails becoming (newly) aware of the limits of what we can perceive. Thus it requires a double movement: closely attending to, and coming to doubt, sensory

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35   Burger, Eugene and Neale, Robert. 2009. *Magic and Meaning*. Seattle: Hermetic Press.

36   During, Simon. 2002. *Modern Enchantments*. London: Harvard University Press: 131–132. https://doi.org/10.2307/4488584

37   Goto-Jones, Chris. 2016. *Conjuring Asia: Magic, Orientalism, and the Making of the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

38   *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language* (Fifth Edition). 2011. https://www.thefreedictionary.com/contrariwise

39   See, for instance, O'Connor, E. 2005. 'Embodied Knowledge', *Ethnography*, 6, 183–204; Ameel, Lieven and Tani, Sirpa. 2012. 'Everyday Aesthetics in Action: Parkour Eyes and the Beauty of Concrete Walls', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 5: 164–173; and Roepstorff, A. 2007. 'Navigating the Brainscape'. In: *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards*, C. Grasseni (Ed.). Oxford: Berghahn Books: 191–206.

40   Wacquant, Loïc J. D. 2004. *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 117.

experiences. As a result, one does magic, but the magic does something back.

Acting 'in the opposite way' also gestures toward another facet of magic implicit in the previous points: the scope for contrasting recommendations about how it should be done.[41] For instance, a long-standing principle is to never foreshadow what is about to be done.[42] To do so provides the audience with information that may enable them to figure out how a feat was accomplished (or, just as bad, to believe they have figured it out). And yet, for one of the towering figures in magic today, Juan Tamariz, skillfully previewing the effect to be performed can add much to the feelings of astonishment generated.[43] A student of Tamariz, Dani DaOrtiz, has gone further to advocate that foreshadowing what is about to happen should be integral to performances. In doing so, conjurors can powerfully affect the expectations, and thereby the emotions, of spectators.[44]

In general, as a continuously developing art form, much of the innovation in conjuring derives from attempts to depart from previously established conventions.[45] At the level of individuals, it is through offering a distinctive presentation style that magicians develop as artists.[46] As an example, a conventional way of characterizing magic is as a performance that draws 'the audience towards the effect and away from the method'.[47] While this is often the case in the kind of magic under study in *Performing Deception*, it is not always so. Performers such as Penn & Teller have used the selective revelation of methods to affect their audiences.

The term *contrariwise*, then, speaks to many facets of magic.

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41    In Western history, the term magic has been repeatedly applied to those activities deemed in opposition to conventional and acceptable forms of belief and practice; see Rally, Robert. 2010. *Magic*. Oxford: Oneworld.

42    See Jones, Graham. 2011. *Trade of the Tricks*. London: University of California Press: 52.

43    Tamariz, Juan. 2019. *The Magic Rainbow*. Rancho Cordova, CA: Penguin Magic: 166–173.

44    DaOrtiz, Dani. 2018. *Working at Home*. Grupokaps: 133.

45    Allen, Jon. 2013. *Connection*. Las Vegas, NV: Penguin Magic.

46    Regal, David. 2021, February 9. *Bristol Society of Magic Lecture*.

47    Lamont, Peter and Wiseman, Richard. 1999. *Magic in Theory*. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press: 31.

# 'Both-And' Relations

Further than just characterizing magic as a back-and-forth of this-and-that, I want to advance a specific way of conceiving the relation between elements. Inspired by Communication Studies scholars Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery's dialectical approach to interpersonal communication,[48] the remaining chapters structure the analysis of learning and performing magic through attending to how they entail opposing but yet co-existing tendencies and features. For instance, as Baxter and Montgomery note, a common fault line in personal relations is how parties negotiate connection and separation. Rather than treating them as opposite states in which couples are either independent or interdependent, Baxter and Montgomery ask how relations invariably involve an interplay between both such tendencies.[49] For instance, achieving a connection is dependent on a sense of there being distinct identities in the first place. Likewise, a sense of individual autonomy is realized through one's relations to others. As a result, to place couples along a spectrum of separation-connection obscures much of the subtlety of personal relations.

It follows from these points that the presence of notionally opposing features is not something to be avoided because it is necessarily disharmonious. Instead, pushes and pulls this way and that are often inescapable. What matters, to draw on the words of the philosopher John Dewey, is the way tendencies 'bear upon one another, their clashes and unitings, the way they fulfil and frustrate, promote and retard, excite and inhibit one another.'[50] Knowing how to act is messy and subject to revision. When considering intimate personal relations, what blend of independence and interdependence is fitting at a given moment depends on the specific history of a couple, as well as how that relationship aligns with wider societal expectations.[51]

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48   Baxter, Leslie A. and Montgomery, Barbara M. 1996. *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics*. London: Guilford.

49   For a further extension of Baxter and Montgomery's approach to face-to-face interactions, see Arundale, Robert B. 2010. 'Constituting Face in Conversation: Face, Facework, and Interactional Achievement', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42: 2078–2105. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2009.12.021.

50   Dewey, John. 1934. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books: 134.

51   Furthermore—as a higher possibility—the qualities of freedom and captivity can be understood as inter-related rather than mutually incompatible and discordant.

In regarding magic as a *deft contrariwise performance*, I adopt a dialectical orientation to escape from delimited conceptualizations of skill, concealment, control and other notions. With this orientation, the ability to creatively work with contrary tendencies is part of what distinguishes the adroit from the not. This 'both-and' orientation exemplifies the spirit of curiosity that has been central to my personal development as a performer. As later chapters detail, my learning did not just consist of gaining new skills and forms of reasoning, but also a sense of the fraught conditions for learning. I came to know, to realize I did not know, to wonder what I could know, and to doubt what I thought I knew through my engagements with others. Stated in different terms, knowledge and ignorance were both mutually constitutive of learning. This 'both-and' orientation is also justified because it provides a basis for acknowledging the contests between conjurors regarding what conduct is appropriate, impactful, meaningful, etc. Indeed, more than just acknowledging the presence of contests, a dialectical orientation suggests the advisability of fostering contests if art forms are to avoid stagnation.

In short, in approaching conjuring as *deft contrariwise performance*, I intend to signal how the undertaking of magic can be understood as dynamic interplay; that is, as a relation of varied considerations that are taken to complement and oppose each other. Again and again in the pages that follow, enculturation into magic will be presented as learning how to position ways of doing, thinking and feeling that are co-existing and conflicting. A central aim of the chapters is to characterize the dynamics whereby self-other, control-cooperation, truth-deception and so on co-exist and conflict.

## Chapters

As an art based on esoteric information and embodied know-how, with little in the way of established instructional institutions or accreditation procedures, how can new entrants to magic develop? Each chapter attends to activities designed to promote learning: instructional texts and videos, training demonstrations, scientific articles, recorded shows and autobiographies. In engaging with such material, each chapter addresses seemingly contrary tendencies identified within conjuring to

assess how they are said to inter-relate, and then to consider the options for how they could be realized together.

Along these lines, Chapter 2 takes as its focus the relationship between *self* and *other*. This is a complex interweaving; as individuals, we cannot be understood as existing completely separate from others, and yet others are clearly not the same as ourselves. How, then, to characterize the relationship between people? I consider this in the case of magic by beginning where my study began: reading written instructions for novice card tricks. Aligned with studies in the field of ethnomethodology, in this chapter I attend to the varied forms of work associated with enacting written instructions. Prominent among them was trying to experience the magic as an audience member. Although making sense of the instructions was a solitary activity (in the sense of being undertaken alone) it repeatedly entailed imagining how tricks would affect others. This imagining was tension-ridden, not least because becoming familiar with the methods for magic had the result of changing my appreciations of what shuffling, picking and naming cards can occasion. The dance between being able to connect with others and becoming estranged from them serves as a central topic of this chapter and a recurring theme for the book.

Chapter 3 offers an understanding of magic as a form of group interaction. I recount my initial experiences in performing magic for audiences, and in particular how we produced and coordinated our conduct in ways that blended *cooperation* and *control*. Based on an innovative group method, I offer a non-conventional view of the performance of conjuring. It is non-conventional in the manner it seeks to de-center magicians. It does so by moving away from conceiving of magic as a performance by conjurors who render their audiences into manageable objects. Instead, I advance the notion of 'reciprocal action' to signal how magic can be understood as an interaction. Herein, audiences can play an active role in enabling deception and concealment, both through how they go along with and how they contest the directives of conjurors.

Chapters 2 and 3 attend to dynamics of intersubjectivity—for instance, how learning and performing magic involves both using analogic reasoning to comprehend how others experience the world, while also appreciating how others can have dissimilar experiences that

are out of reach. In doing so, these chapters establish a central tension in this book: how individuals can simultaneously be brought together and disconnected by deception.

Our undertakings in the world are not simply person-to-person. Instead, they are materially mediated and enabled. Chapter 4 considers how people and the material world are coupled together in conjuring. It does so through the central notion of *naturalness*. Learning magic entails disciplining one's movement and comportment. It also entails cultivating an awareness of how material objects and settings are positioned. One central goal for doing both in modern styles of magic is to make performances look natural, spontaneous and ordinary—and thus expected, justified and above board. And yet, achieving this appearance within a conjuring performance is widely regarded as a hard-won accomplishment involving highly *contrived* actions undertaken with potentially unruly objects and others. This chapter addresses several key questions: how is naturality made intelligible as a feature of action? And how is naturality accomplished specifically within the manufactured setting of a magic show? How are learners taught to appear natural? I map the varied responses given to these questions through reviewing the arguments of prominent professionals as part of written, audiovisual, and face-to-face forms of instruction.

Chapter 5 turns to the interplay of *proficiency* and *inability*. For many types of physical crafts, the mass of manual skills involved are difficult to recount by practitioners because they have become implicit.[52] In the case of magic, the relation between what is on display and the proficiency of the performer is difficult to establish for audiences because the methods at work are obscured. Thus, what is captivating to one audience might not require sophisticated physical skills. Conversely, physically and mentally demanding feats may generate little notice. A further complication in relation to what is displayed to the underlying skills required is that learning magic entails coming into an appreciation of the limits of human perception.

To explore these issues, Chapter 5 attends to the coupled matters of how perception underlies claims to proficiency, as well as how perception is accomplished in specific situations. It begins by outlining some of the

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52   Suchman, Lucy. 1987. *Plans and Situated Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

varied ways magicians give place to technical ability and expert authority. Next, I turn to my performance experiences as a novice, with particular emphasis on how notions of my skill were made relevant within the moment-to-moment unfolding of interactions. In doing so, I elaborate further on points made in previous chapters regarding how magic as an activity is constituted by audiences. Following on from the initial sections, this chapter considers how expertise, proficiency and authority are enacted within instructional settings. I do so through detailing face-to-face training offered as part of a masterclass I undertook with the world-renowned magician Dani DaOrtiz. Part of this analysis includes consideration of how his teaching called into doubt the reliability of students' bodily senses and common forms of reasoning, even as our senses and reasoning as students provided the basis for validating his instructions. Through its varied components, this chapter assesses how appeals to perceptions are used to evidence, demonstrate and challenge notions of who is able to appreciate what is right in front of them.

Chapter 6 turns towards the place of a specific kind of skill cultivated in magic: the ability to sincerely deceive. It does so through examining a particular type of writing which is significant for those seeking to know about the ins and outs of this art: autobiographies. Autobiographies serve as an interesting source for investigation because of how they handle competing demands. On the one hand, this genre is typically built on appeals to authenticity; writers offer readers a backstage view of their lives, experiences and inner thinking. In doing so, this genre generally calls for a demonstration of sincerity. In contrast, much of the aura associated with magicians lies in their ability to dissemble. How then do conjuror-authors fashion their life stories such that they can hold together evidence of their genuineness with evidence of their ability to deceive? How are *truth* and *deception* positioned as part of their accounts? Chapter 6 takes up these and related questions through orientating to autobiographies as 'no less theatrical than other performances'.[53]

Not least because of the highs and lows of the hours and hours spent refining minute hand movements, the process of learning magic can be accompanied by a recurring question: why do this? This question is often accompanied by another one: how? Especially because of the presence

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53   Allen, Jonathan and O'Reilly, Sally. 2009. *Magic Show*. London: Hayward Publishing: 46.

of covertness and the asymmetries in action between magicians and audiences, conjuring is often recognized by its practitioners as a fraught moral activity. In Chapter 7 I want to draw out mutual dependencies in magic by approaching it as an interplay of *care* and *control*. As with other chapters, the starting orientation is not to treat caring and controlling as opposites. Instead, drawing on feminist and other theories of care, I treat caring as entailing forms of controlling, and controlling as enabling forms of caring.

As a way of suggesting the possibilities for being and doing in the world, Chapter 7 also outlines the overall rationale and structure that emerged for my public performances. Instead of approaching magic as a means of accomplishing extraordinary feats with ordinary objects, I framed my performances in terms of appreciating the ordinary. The ordinary here referred to our day-to-day interactions—how we manage to live together with one another. Rather than effectively sweeping audiences away, my goal became one of finding ways to bring them back to the wonder of how we interact together; to the alluring power that is invested in secrets; to how we make perceptual sense of the world with one another and so on. This was done through offering tricks, verbal patter and questioning that took as their topics our very interactions together there and then. In this sense, my style aligned with what Augusto Corrieri referred to as 'meta-theatre'; that is, a form of action that promotes 'self-reflexive interrogation of the status of the act itself'.[54] In my case, though, the self-reflexivity manifested itself in a collective discussion about the interactional dynamics that make magic as part of the making of magic. In this way, an objective was not to have spectators to a show, but participants to a dialogue.

The final chapter offers some concluding points by returning to a question at stake throughout the book: what is magic? In closing, I seek to foster a spirit of curiosity, suppleness and questioning that helps enable novel ways of doing and being. This is done, in part, by revisiting the meaning of other terms central to *Performing Deception*: learning, self, other, method and skill.

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54   Corrieri, Augusto. 2018. 'What Is This…', *Platform*, *12*(2): 16.