

Supplement to "The Magic Circular"
July, 1947.

The Presentation of Magic

REPORT OF A LECTURE
by
CHARLES HARRISON, A.I.M.C.

Delivered before the Magic Circle
April 16th, 1947.

The State Library of Victoria
"ALMA CONJURING COLLECTION"

London:
The Magic Circle, St. Ermin's, Caxton Street, S.W.1.

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC.

A LECTURE BY CHARLES HARRISON, A.I.M.C.

In the absence, through indisposition, of Mr. Neil Weaver, Mr. Victor Peacock, as Chairman, introduced Mr. Charles Harrison to the company which settled down to enjoy the wisdom and advice of a performer whose long and successful experience in the world of magic was alone a sufficiently good introduction.

Mr. Harrison explained that when he first prepared this lecture, some years ago, there was little or no literature on the subject, but recently the matter had received a great deal of attention and many books were now available, such as *Showmanship for Magicians* and *Magic by Misdirection* by Fitzkee, and *Showmanship and Presentation* by Edward Maurice, in addition to the excellent lectures delivered to (and published by) the Magic Circle, by Mr. Victor Peacock, Mr. Eric Mason, and Mr. Trevor Hall.

The subject was so wide, however, that Mr. Harrison felt that it would be possible to deal with some aspects which had not been fully explored.

There was no doubt about the speaker's qualifications to deal with such an important topic. During forty years in which he had been presenting magic to the public, he had a wide experience of almost every type of audience: indoor, outdoor, children and adults, drawing-rooms, clubs, concerts, cabaret, concert party, music hall, cinema, small garden parties to large galas, with audiences ranging from a handful up to many thousands.

Mr. Harrison said that "The Presentation of Magic" was a vast subject and any of its many facets would easily form the subject of a lecture in itself; thus in trying to cover such a wide field he thought it more profitable to deal with fundamentals rather than details, and to discuss *why* certain things should be done rather than *how* they should be achieved. Mr. Harrison continued:—

"The fundamental purpose of this lecture is to discuss what I consider should be the ultimate *aim* of every magician, that is, the *artistic* presentation of *magical* effects to an *interested* audience, or in other words, *to get the maximum entertainment value out of the effects presented.*

"On studying the best methods of obtaining this maximum entertainment value one becomes aware of a great divergence of opinion, yet there must be a *best* way, even if this is not the same for each individual.

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

“Broadly speaking, entertainment value depends on two main factors: personality of the performer and procedure in presentation. Personality is rather an abstract subject for discussion, whilst on procedure I have my own very decided opinions which I know are in conflict with the ideas of others well qualified to hold opinions, so on this part of the subject we cannot hope for, nor expect, universal agreement.

“I believe that personality—or individuality—call it what you will, has three factors: the physical, combining physique and personal appearance; mental, in the cultivation of the mind; and spiritual—that is, personal charm.

“In *Our Magic* we read: ‘A striking personality is an accidental advantage. It may be of great assistance in the practice of Art, yet in itself is not Art, but chance.’

“It does not follow, however, that a person with a striking personality is bound to make a successful magician. Neither is it true that a person not gifted with 100 per cent. personality cannot present a highly successful magical entertainment. It is possible for a performer, lacking in inherent personality so to *act* before an audience as to make his offering pleasing and acceptable. With thought, study and practice one can portray an *assumed* personality which will conceal weaknesses and enhance pleasing characteristics of an individual; therein lies the true art in presenting stage personality in regard to magic or any other form of entertainment.

“If we agree that a physical personality is to a large extent a gift, the question arises, can a magician not well-blessed with this gift do anything about it? I think he can do much.

“Let us take in turn the factors I have detailed:—

“First, the physical factor. It is written, ‘A man cannot, by taking thought, add one cubit to his stature.’ We must admit that. But he can, with care, make the most of whatever physique he possesses. Let every ambitious magician study his own build and physical characteristics and decide how he can bring into prominence the most pleasing features and hide from notice, as far as possible, any that are likely to detract from the appreciation of the audience. A really good tailor and careful make-up can be very helpful in this matter.

“In comedy magic it is possible to utilise even abnormalities of physique to enhance entertainment value. In a straight act one should pay the most minute attention to personal appearance. Nothing should be omitted which will help in giving one the appearance of a well-groomed gentleman.

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

"Next comes deportment. To some extent there is a difference in deportment for the stage, the concert platform and the drawing-room. On the stage everything needs to be somewhat exaggerated; gestures should be bold and sweeping; speech is rather slower than for the platform or drawing-room. There is a specialised technique of stage deportment; close attention must be given to such matters as correct entrance, the proper way to walk about the stage, how to gain and acknowledge applause, the final bow, the exit, taking a curtain, and so forth. Much useful information on these matters can be obtained from a small booklet, *The Art of the Stage*, by Burling Hull.

"There is, however, one phase of deportment which is the same, no matter what the place of entertainment. I refer to correct carriage. Wherever you perform, it is essential to hold the body erect and to walk with most of the weight of the body on the balls of the feet. You must assume a correct posture when standing still to perform manipulations or to address an audience; the feet should be slightly apart and the weight of the body balanced equally on both feet. Standing with the weight on one foot only, or shuffling about is a common fault which betrays to the audience that the performer is ill-at-ease and it detracts from their tranquility and comfortable enjoyment.

"Gestures, too, should be carefully rehearsed. Whether exaggerated on the stage, or more natural in close up work, they must at all times be easy graceful movements, made slowly and elegantly. Above all they should appear natural and blend with the rest of the physical personality. They should be designed to create a desired impression and yet not appear to be assumed from the audience point of view. If gesture is used to suggest a magical occurrence, such as waving a wand to bring about a transformation, etc., it should be performed seriously and with due regard to the mental impression on the audience. The use of this kind of gesture in a ridiculous or burlesque manner by one professing to present magic is degrading to the art. It should be left to the comedy conjurer to present burlesque.

"The question of display—the correct handling of magical apparatus—is a great art. Obviously, articles should be handled gracefully, but there is more to it than that. They should be handled so as to *attract* attention—held before the eyes of the spectators long enough for them to gain a clear impression of what they are intended to watch."

(At this point Mr. Harrison demonstrated the colour-changing billiard ball and silks to flag, emphasising the main points by gesture and display and not by speech.)

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

"You may feel I am straying from the subject of 'Personality' to 'Technique' by considering these details; while they are not necessarily part of a person's inherent personality I do argue that attention to such details affect the *apparent* and *assumed* personality which is put before an audience and it is on this *assumed personality* that the audience will base its evaluation of your efforts.

"Now let us consider briefly how the physical characteristics of speech affect personality.

"In a lecture of this sort one cannot be expected to go into the details of phonetics and elocution, but I suggest that every performer who uses speech should ask himself, 'How good is my speech?' 'Why does it matter?' 'What can I do about it?'

"The performer must discover what his speech lacks; an excellent way to do this is to listen carefully to a recording of one's own voice. Here I would like to interpose a few extracts from *The Sphinx* for October 1942, emphasising the importance of good speech:—

'It is an indisputable fact that the man who has better control of his language and who speaks more clearly, more eloquently, more graphically or more charmingly than those with whom he associates, will, to a lesser or greater degree, control those people of whom his universe is composed.'

'Your accent should betray neither your mother's birthplace nor your father's income.'

'The real personality of man is audible, not visible.'

'Your audience can be won or repelled by your voice.'

"If, through some personal defect, a performer cannot make his speech a real asset to his magical performance, he should give up the idea of a patter act and concentrate on a silent presentation.

"A well-informed mind forms a background of personality which is appreciated, maybe unconsciously, by the audience. Good diction, as distinguished from good enunciation, is part of one's mental personality; it is largely the result of a little study applied to the words themselves. Therefore get a good vocabulary and regard it as a tool-kit of speech, with which you must be familiar in the most minute detail. Each word should have a personality of its own including such qualities as speed, light, colour and weight. The art of good speech is nothing more than the painting of pictures with words; therefore choose your words with care and form your sentences so as to convey your exact meaning in the simplest manner.

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

"This can add to the strength of your personality—the mental personality appreciated consciously by an audience. How can one improve that part which is unconsciously appreciated?

"I would suggest, by keeping an open mind on all subjects, ever ready to consider, and accept or reject, according to one's judgment, new theories, ideas or suggestions as they are propounded. By making a specialised study of Magic, but not confining one's interests solely to this subject; by becoming acquainted, intelligently, with facts pertaining to as many other subjects as possible. Especially would I recommend the study of kindred arts: drama, music, painting and sculpture. Also at least a nodding acquaintance with some of the sciences. Magnetism, electricity and mechanics are especially useful as they can be incorporated in the technical side of magic. Any serious study likely to give the student a broader outlook on life and its environment will almost certainly strengthen the personality.

"Finally we arrive at Spiritual Personality, a factor so abstract that instead of trying to deal with it myself I will quote from Will Goldston's *Tricks that Mystify*. Writing of personality, he states:—

"There are certain things which cannot be learned from hints. Take, for instance, the secret of that indescribable quality known as 'Charm.' Some men are naturally charming and some—excellent fellows, no doubt—seem to repel rather than attract people. I cannot tell a magician how to be charming to an audience, but I can give this sound piece of advice. The man who, in private life, is always thinking of the comfort and happiness of other people—the people he meets—is far more likely to be charming to an audience than the selfish man who is forever thinking of Number One. If I had to give the secret of being charming in one word, I should say—'Unselfishness.'"

"I believe in that statement; Goldston has got very near the root of the matter and I will add only one comment... The more strongly a man realises that he has an immortal soul which is part of and belongs to the Vast Immortal Spirit from which all souls derive their being, and to which all return, the more likely is his personality to have a strong appeal to all kindred souls. Without any desire to bring religion into this discussion, I do ask you to give this fact your serious consideration.

"PROCEDURE OF PRESENTATION. This, in my opinion, involves two headings: Preparation and Performance.

"If you are a conscientious performer, it will be axiomatic that you have mastered the technical manipulations necessary

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

to the performance of any feat you propose to present and will have perfected the necessary skill before ever attempting to present it to the public.

"What can be more debasing to the Magic Art than faulty and obvious manipulation? It is regrettable that this is sometimes seen in the performances of amateurs and some semi-professionals. An artiste with faulty technique would have little chance of getting engagements on the Vaudeville stage.

"What should be the purpose of this first stage—Preparation? It should be, as just stated, to perfect oneself in all the technicalities necessary to ensure that the presentation has become almost second nature.

"I have seen so-called magicians who obviously thought no other considerations were necessary; they had learned to do the trick and they did it, without further elaboration. You may call that conjuring if you will, but it is most certainly not magical entertainment.

"In my view, that procedure is just as if an artist exhibited for appreciation the rough pencilled draft of a picture which, if finished, would be a beautiful painting. How are we to add the colour, the light and shade to the skeleton outline of the effect represented by our ability to perform the technical part of it?

"Before discussing the treatment of individual effects, which are like the separate details of our picture, I should like, for a few moments, to dwell on the picture as a whole. By this I would like to consider points affecting the whole of your magical presentation, be it of ten minutes' duration or a whole evening's performance.

"Just as there are various styles in the treatment of painting—Turner with his broad splashes of vivid colour, compared with Leighton with his delicate treatment of minute detail—so there are various styles in presenting magic. Where could one find a better illustration of this than the recent Grand Festival of the Magic Circle? The serious, the light and humorous and the broad comedy styles were all amply represented.

"Choose your own style and work along the lines it suggests. The supreme test of the style suitable for yourself is that it should be suitable to your personality—natural to your personality. This does not mean that you appear before an audience in exactly the same character that you conduct yourself with your fellows. It *may* be possible to do this, but if most of us did not *add* something to that normal conduct,

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

our offerings, as magicians, would be in serious jeopardy of falling flat.

"Some of our best comedians,—quite serious-minded men in private life—do not carry their flippancy into their everyday activities, yet on the stage their absurdities seem quite natural to them. They *act* an assumed personality, so that it seems inherent and real. Their acting is concealed by their art; this is true not only of comedians, but of all really good actors; it should be true of magicians too.

"Some performers like to work in Chinese character, some as an Egyptian or Hindu. If you present a character of this kind and wish to do it well, you must learn to present it so that you appear to be the real thing and not as an Englishman giving an imitation. You must lose your own personality absolutely in the character you are representing. If you study the assumed character sufficiently and lose yourself entirely in your imagination of that character, you will forget you are acting and live the part convincingly.

"Now let us turn to the preparation of individual effects. Different magicians have different ideas regarding preparation, but provided satisfactory results are achieved, one method is as good as another. Unfortunately, one meets many who consider only the mastery of manipulations or the workings of a piece of apparatus, before putting an effect into their programme. I should imagine this lack of preliminary preparation accounts for many poor presentations.

"The man who can buy, or make, a new effect, in the morning and put it into his programme the same evening, with certainty that he is getting full entertainment value out of it, must certainly be a genius. Far too many attempt to do what only a genius could hope to accomplish.

"For what it is worth I will describe my own procedure in carrying out this preliminary preparation.

"CHOOSING AN EFFECT. My first consideration is: 'Will it fit my style?' and the second: 'Do I feel a strong desire to perform it?' If I feel that I shall not thoroughly enjoy performing a certain effect, I reject it without any consideration as to the appeal it may have to the audience. I believe it is a great mistake to incorporate an effect simply because some other performer can make a big hit with it, or because it is the latest thing on the market.

"Have you ever wondered why one man can make so much more out a particular effect than can another? Just what was it that made Horace Goldin's presentation of the 'Egg Bag'

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

so popular? Why did De Biere score so heavily with the 'Thumb Tie'?—and what was it that made his billiard ball routine into a magical masterpiece?

"I believe it was because these performers studied the effects so closely as to squeeze the last ounce of entertainment value out of them. First the effects were naturally suited to their personalities, or rather, they made the presentation blend perfectly with the stage personality.

"I am not going to suggest that I can attempt to teach you how to get the same effect out of the 'Egg Bag' as did Goldin but I believe I can put before you certain considerations which will enable you to get the maximum entertainment value of *which you are capable*, out of the effects you present.

"Much depends upon the psychological approach. First, the effect must have a magical plot. The more simple the plot, the better the chance of appreciation from the audience. You must have a very clear idea of what that plot is and you must see that the audience realise it too, before you come to the end of the trick.

"Next, if you can suggest, in your presentation, some reason for the effect of magic occurring (and the farther from the real explanation your suggestion is, the better) you will find this more effective than leaving the audience guessing as to how it happened. They may guess rightly and the mystification will then be lacking.

"Thirdly, there must be some *mystification*. I believe it is a mistake to sacrifice mystification for entertainment value, although there are magicians who evidently disagree. They put over effects of which the *modus operandi* is so obvious that there can be hardly any mystification at all. (I have sat and heard remarks from laymen, such as 'Anyone can see how that was done.') They use these effects as pegs on which to hang a number of gags which get laughs and therefore entertain the audience, and they would have us believe they are doing a magical act. Far better, in my opinion, for them to do a comedian's turn and leave magic severely alone.

"Returning to my method of preparation. Having decided an effect is satisfactory, the next step is to consider the plot. I plan the procedure to make the plot clear and outstanding to the audience. I believe this is technically termed 'pointing'. Next I master the necessary sleights and familiarise myself with the working of the apparatus to ensure slick performance without fumbling.

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

"The next step is to write out the patter. The first draft is revised and blue-pencilled freely, to reduce the words to an absolute minimum consistent with an adequate presentation of the effect. After constant revision, I memorise the patter and practice delivery in order to make it appear as spontaneous as possible.

"I am then all set for rehearsal, but before commencing rehearsal proper, I have to decide on the lay-out of the properties to ensure smooth running of the entire act.

"Now follows sufficient rehearsal to make me thoroughly acquainted with the exact working of the effect. The aim is to ensure that I am perfectly certain what I am going to say, and how and when I am going to say it; I shall know exactly where everything is, how, when and where I shall move to use the necessary props. All this talking, moving and manipulation must become sub-conscious so that full attention can be given to entertaining the audience and to sensing their reactions during the performance.

"This being done one can consider this individual effect is ready for presentation.

"Next, one has to consider the building up of an entertainment, whether it be a short act of ten minutes or a whole entertainment of an hour or more. I believe this is known as routining.

"ROUTINING. This could very well form the subject of a lecture in itself. Briefly, the fundamental aim of routining should be to ensure smooth-running of the act in order to obtain sustained interest. Entrance should command attention; the first effect should create interest; all that follows should be designed to hold that interest and build it up to a climax at the end of the performance. Anything likely to create a hiatus, with consequent flagging of interest, should be avoided. In showman's parlance, one should '*Get 'em; hold 'em; tear 'em up!*'"

(Here Mr. Harrison gave a very neat demonstration of a silk routine, as an example of sequence and building up.)

"ORIGINALITY. It is generally agreed that if you can present original magic, provided it is up to a certain standard, you obtain better appreciation than if your effects are just as presented by other magicians.

"Most magicians add to their repertoire in one of four ways: they purchase a trick from a dealer; they get another magician to teach it to them; they read it in a magical publication, or they see a fellow-magician present it and straight-away purloin it—complete with patter.

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

"A fifth, and most infrequent method, is to invent a new effect for oneself. This is very difficult and few can do it. If any of you are ever lucky enough to invent a really good effect, I can almost guarantee it will be one of the best in *your* show.

"But to return to the four commoner ways of acquiring effects ; I trust you will never employ the fourth one, namely, 'pinching' another fellow's effect. Ethics and the rules of most magical societies forbid this. If you use any of the other three, I am convinced you will never get the best possible results out of your magic.

"If then, you cannot invent your own effects, how can you succeed? I believe the secret of success is to embody in each effect you present, something of your own creation ; some alteration of technique ; some original idea of presentation ; some novelty of plot or some suggestion as to the reason for the magical occurrence which is *absolutely* your own. In this way you will make the effect suit your style and you will 'get it over' with *far more success than if you follow slavishly* the instructions from the dealer, or the book, or copy another performer's presentation.

"Build up the effect around a plot which appeals to you personally ; one in which you feel you can create the interest of the audience. If possible, write your own patter. If you cannot do this, be sure the patter you use fits you, and is natural to your style. In this way you should be able to achieve success with every item you present.

"Let me give you three practical examples of how the foregoing advice works out in my own case.

"First, the 'Cut and Restored Rope.' When I first presented this simply as a cut and restored effect, I got very little out of it, but when I changed the plot to 'Magic Scissors' which worked in a mysterious manner, the effect became one of the features of my show."

(Inviting two members of the audience on to the stage, Mr. Harrison presented the first with an 'ordinary' pair of scissors and the second with his 'magic' scissors ; then in a clever cut and restored rope routine, only the cuts made with the 'magic' scissors were restored. The careful thought, plotting and routining given to this item was fully justified by the result—a popular effect presented in a novel manner, with skill, humour and showmanship.

As a second example, Mr. Harrison demonstrated some very effective card tricks, emphasising the difference between the commonplace method of presentation and the presentation imbued with his own personality.

Finally he presented the 'Linking Rings,' using only five rings in a routine which was remarkably impressive and proved undeniably the value of his advice.)

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

Continuing his lecture, Mr. Harrison said :

"I can assure you that, as just demonstrated, I try to put something of my own personality into every effect incorporated in my repertoire, and have done this for as long as I can remember. Any success I enjoy in presenting Magic is due to this effort to make the effect my own, more than any other factor. I feel this to be true of practically all performers of repute.

"I must draw to a close, although there are many more points which should be dealt with in an exhaustive treatise. Some of these are as important as the points already dealt with, such as :—

1. Speed in presentation.
2. Stage setting.
3. Musical accompaniment.
4. Use of assistants.
5. Showmanship. (Some of my previous remarks have only touched the fringe of this subject.)
6. Control of an audience, and audience reaction. (Here I would say that a performer should be able to make his audience *think* and *feel* as *he* wishes. This involves a discussion on the psychology of Magic.)
7. Stage craft.
8. Audience appeal. (In *Showmanship for Magicians*, Fitzkee analyses entertainment value in great detail, a value which he insists is enhanced by a great number of 'audience appeals.' He lists nearly forty of these. Obviously, the more 'audience appeals' one includes in one's performance, the more entertainment value one will get, but in spite of Fitzkee's exhaustive list, he omits any reference to what I consider to be the most important audience appeal in a *magical* entertainment. Surely the magician should present *MYSTERY*. I consider that Mystery, properly presented, has a most strong appeal to the majority of persons requiring entertainment.)
9. Applause. The obtaining of, and control of applause is to my mind an important factor in any form of entertainment. There is much to be learned about this—more than we can discuss at the moment, but I will give a few hints :

"First, you must be sure your work deserves applause. Knowing this, you must ask for it—but in such a manner

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

that the audience responds without realising the request. Having asked for it, you must wait for it; show the audience where you expect it and it will come. Hold it back at points where it would break the continuity of the effect, but where you want it and it is forthcoming, do not discourage the audience by cutting it short when they wish to continue.

“And now, finally, to return for a moment to the entertainment value of Mystery. We know that, to-day, there is scarcely any member of an audience who believes in ‘Magic’ in the way the credulous and superstitious public accepted it in olden times. Education and the marvels of modern science have destroyed the idea of ‘Magic,’—that is, the idea of any human being calling himself a magician and breaking all the laws of nature or performing miracles. We would think it immoral for the modern entertainer to try to impose such an idea on the public to-day.

“But can there be any reason why the modern magician, whilst entertaining, should not *pretend* he has these powers? Personally, I feel he is not entitled to call himself a magician if he does not do so. Far too many performers omit this pretence. They argue that the audience *know* it is all trickery, so what is the use of pretending? They give an entertainment in such a style that from start to finish the audience are given no other idea than that they are witnessing trickery. The only attempt at deception is to deceive the physical senses, whereas our real business as magicians should be deception of the mind.

“If the spectators know, from the start, it is all trickery, how can they be persuaded that they are witnessing magic?

“It is all a matter of playing on the imagination and *acting* in such a manner that their reasoning faculties are set at rest, so that the only faculties lively and active are those of the appreciation and enjoyment of *imaginary* happenings which they are witnessing! Do you think this impossible?

“Consider for a moment the reactions of the average person to a modern film or stage play. Just as they know our shows are trickery, they know also that the film or stage play is pretence. Yet when the ‘G man’ shoots, or the stage hero kisses the heroine, do they stop to think that none of it is real? If they did, the play would be a failure, the film would be a flop. The really efficient actor can so appeal to the emotions of the audience that when he falls dead each member of the audience accepts his demise as an accomplished fact. It is not until afterwards that the spectators realise—if they stop to think at all—that what they witnessed was make-believe! If this is not true, how else can you explain

THE PRESENTATION OF MAGIC

the laughter, the tears and the cheers which come irresistibly during a dramatic performance ?

“If the actor can do this with his part, is it impossible for the magician to create the the impression of real magic whilst his effects are in presentation ? No, it is not impossible if he knows his business and can put it into practice. To do this properly he must have a thorough knowledge of the psychological side of magical presentation and must be a good actor into the bargain.

“My final advice, therefore is, get a thorough knowledge of the histrionic art, apply its principles to the presentation of your effects, and give your audience what appears to be *real magic* and not just tricks.

And so ended a lecture based on long, practical experience, and enhanced by the critical thought of a sincere performer. It was followed by a lively discussion and even after Mr. Harrison had been gracefully thanked, on behalf of the company, by the Chairman, Mr. Victor Peacock, there was an animated group around Mr. Harrison who elaborated certain points of his lecture to interested enquirers.

Report prepared by BRUCE POSGATE.